

Exploring the relationship between organizational politics and women's access to power in the workplace: An action research inquiry

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of
Liverpool for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration by

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Date: August 15, 2018

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Abstract

This study explored ways in which professional women could effectively engage in political behaviour within environments dominated by men, with the objective of increasing their informal and formal power at work. Action research was employed as the method of accomplishing this, enabling study participants to enact various initiatives in their efforts to positively affect the efficacy of their political engagement. This enabled the collection of qualitative data through action learning sets and individual interviews, which provides insights into women's political will and skill within male-dominated contexts. Central to this study was a six-member action learning set whose members credited their participation in this project with changes in their perceptions of organizational politics, a clearer understanding of how to engage politically, and for three of the six, increased levels of professional power and visibility. Based on the experiences of these learning set members, this research project offers women working within similar circumstances potential strategies that may be employed to more effectively engage in political activity to enhance their power and influence. Additionally, this study produced recommendations for organizations seeking to assist professional women in securing greater authority, visibility, and attain higher-level leadership positions. This includes suggestions about how to ungender organizations, identifying women's motivations to engage in political behaviours, and normalizing organizational politics as an accepted way of accomplishing goals. From an academic perspective, this project aligns with previous research on this topic by supporting the theory that a relationship exists between political will and skill and offers insights into the use of action research as a means of generating knowledge and creating change.

Declaration

I hereby certify that this Thesis constitutes my own work, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another. I declare that the Thesis describes original work that has not previously been presented for the award of any other degree of any institution.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Women have increasingly entered the workforce in larger numbers, and according to a 2017 study, women represent 45.1% of the labour force within the province of Alberta (Government of Alberta, 2017). Additionally, 57.7% of Alberta women, aged fifteen and older, possess some form of post-secondary education, and women represent 52.1% of Alberta employees with university degrees (Government of Alberta, 2017). Further, women in senior roles are proven to be as effective as their male counterparts, even though they may apply different methods to accomplish the same goals (Deloitte, 2012). Given this data, one would expect that a significant percentage of women would also hold positions of authority, such as Manager, Director, and Executive roles. This, however, is not the case, and the percentage of women in leadership positions has remained relatively static over the past decade, despite organizational and individual efforts to promote more women. In top positions, Canadian women hold 25% of Vice-President positions and 15% of CEO roles (Women's Foundation, 2017). Further, Catalyst reports that, within the private sector, only 25.6% of senior leadership roles are occupied by women (Catalyst, 2016).

In my private consulting practice, conversations with clients have indicated similar trends, despite efforts to increase the numbers of women in leadership roles. This seems to be especially true in traditionally masculine industries such as oil and gas, and utilities. In one instance, a client related the fact that their organization has made concerted efforts, over a ten-year period, to increase the visibility of women by promoting a greater number of them into leadership roles. After reviewing the results of their initiatives, this organization reported that they had not made any progress, despite focused attention on this issue for a decade. This information led me to consider the effectiveness of the organizational strategies employed, which included initiatives such as focusing on women as a subset of organizational diversity and inclusion objectives, mentoring programs specifically for women professionals, and presentations by successful women who had attained senior leadership roles. Given the apparent lack of progress made as a result of these initiatives, I began to view this problem as a wicked one, which Rittel and Webber (1973) describe as having no obvious or easy solution. Following discussions with various organizations using the afore-mentioned strategies, and my own review of their initiatives and the literature on this topic, I began to look for alternative solutions outside of the ones being traditionally employed. This led me to consider the potential impact of organizational politics.

Organizational politics is defined as the unofficial and informal actions taken to accomplish goals, exert influence, and access informal power (Organizational Behaviour, 2010). Mayes and Allen (1977) offer an even more succinct definition, stating simply that politics provides the means to control and influence others, allowing individuals to wield power that can far exceed their organizational role. Considering political activity in this context led me to explore the relationship between women's professional success and political activity. In the literature I reviewed both prior to and during this study, I discovered very little that specifically addressed the impact of gender on political engagement. In my professional experience, I often encountered the phrase "old boys' club", referring to the dominance of men in the workplace. In this context, the term broadly refers to not only the predominance of men in key roles, but also to the tendency for men to engage in behaviours and activities that make it difficult for women to build relationships with them, and to leverage those relationships for their and the organization's benefit. Women employed in traditionally masculine professions, such as engineering or information technology, and those working within masculine industries, frequently cited gender as a major barrier in their careers, explaining that their professional success was hindered regardless of their knowledge or skill.

Personally, I had also noted that women seem to have a more difficult time engaging in political behaviours, many of which are masculine in nature or require women to behave in ways that are deemed distasteful. Repeatedly, I observed talented women professionals' expertise being overlooked or undervalued, while individuals with political savvy seemed to excel and thrive in their careers. Intrigued, I found myself wanting to know whether increased and more effective engagement in organizational politics was the key to women accessing greater informal power, and in turn, moving into higher levels of formal authority. This provided the focus for my study and had me seeking a client partner who would allow me to conduct research within their organization. Unlike many action research projects, I sought to conduct my study within an outside organization rather than within my own company. The organization selected is located in Alberta, Canada and operates within the public service realm. This organization resides in a functional area in which professional roles, specifically engineering, are traditionally occupied by men, and where men dominate through their presence in all senior management positions. Within this organization, the focus of this study centred on a learning set comprised of six professional women whose goal was to enhance their levels of informal and formal power through political engagement. Additional data collected for this research project resulted from interviews with the learning set members at the conclusion of the action learning sets.

1.1 Research Approach & Objectives

When selecting an organization with which to partner and use as the site of my study, I was influenced by the insights gained into many different organizations through my consulting work. From my client interactions I concluded that women's experiences varied depending on the type and industry of the organization, with women professionals encountering the greatest challenges within fields dominated by men. This realization indicated that a context-specific solution would be required, which lent itself well to the principles of action research. Taking advantage of the numerous methods available as part of action research, I decided to focus on qualitative forms by collecting data during six rounds of action learning and individual participant interviews.

As is the norm for action research, the overarching objective for this study was the creation of knowledge that would assist the individuals involved in this study, by highlighting opportunities for organizational and individual change. While generalizable knowledge was not a primary goal for this project, it was hoped that the results would offer insights to practitioners and women professionals in similar situations. These objectives were supported primarily by a focus on action learning as both a research method and structured process for implementing change, which in turn was guided by Revans' action learning model which describes the alpha, beta, and gamma systems (Coghlan and Coghlan, 2010), producing learning at three levels:

1. Researcher – highlighting opportunities for change that will enhance my ability to engage politically;
2. Others – describing tactics that other women may employ to increase their effectiveness; and
3. Organizations and/or industry – offering strategies grounded in both theory and practice that masculine-dominated organizations and industries can use to change the experience and effectiveness of women professionals.

This research project was further focused by the following primary and secondary research questions:

1. What impact does organizational politics have on women's abilities to access formal and informal power in the workplace?
 - 1.1 How does organizational politics facilitate or inhibit professional women from accessing power?
 - 1.2 How can professional women engage in organizational politics more effectively?

Underpinning the above project goals was my personal objective, which was to extend my journey as a scholarly practitioner. Having practiced as a consultant and leader for many years, I sought new ideas that would enable not only my effectiveness but also the effectiveness of my clients. I viewed this study as an opportunity to extend my understanding of this topic, which was accomplished by:

1. Reviewing the academic and business literature;
2. Exposing and testing the mental models that guide my actions; and
3. Actively experimenting and reflecting on a variety of interventions geared towards enhancing both study participants' engagement organizational politics as well as my own.

1.2 Thesis Structure

As highlighted in the previous section, the action research undertaken in this study was largely dependant on the iterative cycles of action learning meetings that took place, and which provided insights into this topic. While the phases of action research cycles are described in a linear fashion, the actions, learnings, reflection, and changes that occurred during the course of this project do not lend themselves well to a linear narrative. As a result, this Findings, and Discussion, Reflections and Implications chapters are organized by the key themes which emerged, each of which delves into sub-topics and describes the experiences of the women taking part in this research. Both chapters draw on the qualitative data gathered. Recommendations stemming from this project are offered in the Reflections and Implications section and, where appropriate, include links to the literature reviewed.

Prefacing the experiences of research participants, I provide an understanding of the topic being explored by discussing the relevant literature and how it has shaped our understanding of, and engagement in, organizational politics. Additionally, I highlight in this chapter how the literature contributed to a new and final version of my research questions. Next is a description of the methodology employed, providing the reader with an overview of action research, the qualitative data collection methods used, and relevant information about how this study unfolded. Following the methodology section is a detailed description of my findings, which presents the categories of learnings and results produced by research participants. This section also provides a description of the action learning sets, offering insights into the action-oriented nature of this study. This is followed by an overview of the meaning generated by my data, and a discussion of my learnings and conclusions as a researcher, with references to the literature, highlighting areas of agreement and divergence.

In summary, this thesis explores the relationship between organizational politics and women's access to power in the workplace, and is ordered as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
3. Methodology
4. Findings
5. Discussion, Reflections and Implications
6. Conclusion

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The topic of organizational politics is not a new one, and over the years it has been referred to in terms that range from manipulation and coercion, to influence and achievement (Forret and Dougherty, 2001; Drory and Vigoda-Gadot, 2010). Some suggest that organizational politics and its associated tactics are inexorably woven into the fabric of today's workplaces, making political skill a key one for managers who are expected to wield the informal authority gained through their relationships to further organizational objectives (Treadway *et al.*, 2005; Drory and Vigoda-Gadot, 2010). This has created an environment within which some organizational members feel that power and rewards are unfairly distributed to those acting politically, while reluctant to engage in those same activities themselves (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004). The literature offers many potential explanations for this, including differences in personality and societal backgrounds, however it seems clear that gender also has an impact on one's attitudes towards organizational politics.

Informed by the current literature, this review strives to provide an understanding of organizational politics and gender, both individually and when interrelating with one another. The specific questions addressed in this review include:

- What effect does gender have on individuals' engagement in organizational politics?
- What impact does organizational politics have on women's abilities to access formal and informal power in the workplace?
- What can women do to engage in organizational politics more effectively?

To address these questions, this review drew from a variety of sources, including peer-reviewed articles, books in both electronic and hard-copy formats, and online information published by notable organizations who operate primarily in the practitioner realm. In an effort to understand the most current views on organizational politics and gender, a majority of the literature reviewed focused on the past decade (approximately 2008 – 2018), however, older materials were also reviewed when referenced within the current literature. Similarly, the search terms that framed this review began with terms that included "organizational politics AND gender", "gender bias", and "male dominance", and broadened to encompass terms such as "gendered power relations" as this project unfolded. A complete list of the search terms used is provided in Appendix 1. While the amount of literature reviewed was large, a smaller portion of it is reflected here, representing the focus of this study, which is

on organizational politics and gender. As such, some information about women and leadership, gender stereotypes, and masculine cultures is included in order to inform my research questions, but I chose not to present any of these themes in depth to avoid diluting the focus of this study.

In an attempt to understand the factors involved in answering the afore-mentioned questions, this paper includes sections on each of the following:

- Women in the workplace – discussing the current state of women professionals, including the percentages of women employed in leadership roles and in masculine-dominated fields;
- Organizational politics – a discussion of the research in this area, offering associated terms and perceptions of political tactics;
- Women and organizational politics – a review of women’s views and experiences with political environments; and
- Strategies to enable women – a discussion of the strategies discussed in the literature that are designed to aid women in participating in organizational politics, especially when employed within organizations or sectors that are dominated by men.

2.1 Women in the Workplace

Women make up a significant portion of the current workforce, nearly 50% in many instances, however they remain under-represented in certain industries and in senior management, especially in executive and board positions (McEldowney *et al.*, 2009; Baumgartner and Schneider, 2010; Bosak and Sczesny, 2011; Weidenfeller, 2012). According to a survey completed in 2015 by Catalyst (2016), Canadian women represented 47.2% of the workforce, but only held a third of all management and senior management roles. In Alberta, the numbers are similar, with a 2015 survey of the labour force stating that women represent 44.9% of the workforce (Work Alberta, 2015). Despite the high numbers of women working, they are not distributed equally across industries, and Work Alberta reports a significant lack of women employees in certain sectors such as utilities, which employs only 0.5% of all women working in the province. This finding is echoed by Willey (2017) who indicates that the resource industry in Canada employs a lower-than-average number of women in senior leadership and board positions, which is partly explained by the lower percentage of women overall who work in this sector.

This study’s research participants, all of whom work for a single organization within the utility industry, report working in an organization where employees are predominantly men, and one that hires

individuals into traditionally masculine professions such as engineering and construction. Further, this organization has a man occupying the top leadership role. Reporting to this senior manager, and providing direction to the department in which participants work, are four Directors, all of whom are also men (City of Calgary, 2016). In instances such as these, the literature suggests that women can often be found in marginalized roles due to their gender, resulting in a disregard for their work and input (Charles, 2014; Watkins and Smith, 2014). These organizations are likely to value and reward the characteristics of the dominant demographic group, suggesting the promotion of those attributes associated with men versus those associated with women (Doldor, 2011; Doldor, 2013; Watkins and Smith, 2014). In these situations, women may find it difficult to advance due to their lack of access to individuals of influence, lack of mentoring opportunities, and the enhanced effect of gender stereotypes (Bierema, 2017).

The current research offers a number of explanations for the present situation, including the artificial barrier known as the “glass ceiling”, which prevents women from rising beyond certain levels; biases surrounding women’s leadership potential; barriers such as personal difficulties and interpersonal challenges; and a general reticence towards the pursuit of power (Baumgartner and Schneider, 2010; Deloitte, 2012; Weidenfeller, 2012; Bongiorno *et al.*, 2014). Other metaphors that are also used to describe women’s lack of movement into senior positions are the “glass cliff”, which refers to the act of placing women into difficult circumstances where failure is likely; the “glass escalator, which may advantage men’s progression into more senior roles, despite operating in workplaces that are dominated by women; and the concrete ceiling, referring to the discrimination of women of ethnic minorities (Snyder and Green, 2008; Smith *et al.*, 2012; Yaghi, 2018). Some of these barriers may be attributed to gender, a social construction that refers to the differences, real or perceived, between what men and women do, and which suggests that women would not hold positions of power similar to those held by men (Budgeon, 2014; Bierema, 2017). From this standpoint, it is possible to conclude that agency, or the ability of women to choose and affect their circumstances, has little ability to change the current situation (Block, 2013).

Proponents of the traditional feminist movement would contradict this view, emphasizing women’s abilities to influence social structures and gender relationships in a positive fashion (Budgeon, 2014). Aligned with this approach, the literature recommends actions that can be implemented at both the individual and organizational levels, addressing both agency and structure, such as formal mentoring

programs in which women in senior roles guide those in more junior positions, inclusion in informal networks in which influential relationships develop, and the application of processes to identify and develop those women who possess particular personal attributes (Mavin, 2008; Weidenfeller, 2012; Thomas *et al.*, 2004). An area that has received relatively little attention, however, is the effect of organizational politics on the efficacy of women professionals, especially when operating within masculine-dominated organizations, roles or industries.

2.2 Organizational Politics

Organizational politics can be defined as the ways in which people attempt to informally influence others in order to further their own or their group's interests or objectives (Doldor *et al.*, 2013; Kaya *et al.*, 2016). According to Mintzberg (1983, cited in Treadway *et al.*, 2005), organizations should be viewed as political arenas, necessitating individuals to possess both the motivation and ability - political will and political skill - to engage in political behaviours. The latter item, political skill, has been identified as correlating to successful management performance, and includes the ability to understand the working environment, capitalize on workplace coalitions, and influence others (Treadway *et al.*, 2005; Drory and Vigoda-Gadot, 2010; Doldor *et al.*, 2013.; Watkins and Smith, 2014). In the business world, this ability to influence in order to accomplish objectives is sometimes referred to as organizational awareness or political savvy, which acknowledges that decisions are frequently made outside of formal reporting relationships (Hay Group, 2010). While political skill deals with the competency of an individual to engage in political behaviour, Shaughnessy *et al.* (2017) also highlight the need for ambition, or a desire to attain power, as a motivating factor in acting politically. This power motivation is attributed with energizing individuals to engage in organizational politics and is suggested to be a necessary precursor to the demonstration of political skills (Shaughnessy *et al.*, 2017). Kapoutsis *et al.* (2017) offer a counterpoint to this argument, stating that political will is not always self-serving in nature, but can also be stem from self-sacrifice, or the motivation to put others' interests ahead of one's own. Doldor (2017) states that these differences can be explained with one's level of political maturity, describing self-serving political activity as being associated with junior leaders, while self-sacrifice motivates leaders at more senior levels.

Many view political activity as something that is engaged in intentionally, but that is unsanctioned and possibly in conflict with organizational norms (Mintzberg, 1983; Gotsis, and Kortezi, 2010; Sultan *et al.*, 2015). While organizational politics is frequently associated with the informal power necessary to

accomplish objectives, it is also often described in negative terms such as manipulative, exploitative, selfish, subversive, and unfair (Forret and Dougherty, 2001; Drory and Vigoda-Gadot, 2010; Doldor *et al.*, 2013). Even those who perceive organizational politics negatively acknowledge that it is necessary and inevitable in workplaces, especially for those holding more senior positions (Forret and Dougherty, 2001; Deloitte, 2012; Kaya *et al.*, 2016). Further, organizational politics is described as an effective strategy in the accomplishment of tasks, and as something that is inexorably linked to organizational functioning and decision-making (Jarrett, 2017; Landells and Albrecht, 2017). With a more balanced view of organizational politics, Landells and Albrecht (2017) report both negative and positive outcomes that result from political activity. The authors cite negative results that include high turnover, low morale, and increased conflict and tension, in addition to positive outcomes, such as higher productivity and innovation, and goal achievement.

Drory and Vigoda-Gadot (2010) extend that one's view of organizational politics is influenced by two factors: the level of political skill demonstrated and the purpose of acting politically. In this latter instance, those acting in their own self-interest are judged negatively, while those acting in the best interest of the organization, or the majority of the population, are judged positively (Davey, 2008; Drory and Vigoda-Gadot, 2010; Kaya *et al.*, 2016). Landells and Albrecht (2017) offer a similar perspective, with their research participants referring to good and bad politics when discussing individuals' behaviours. In contrast to some literature, which defines politics as positive or negative based on intentionality or results, Landells and Albrecht (2017) extend that individuals' perceptions are influenced by their perspectives, which they define as integrated, strategic, reluctant, and reactive. The authors define these terms as follows:

- Integrated – view organizational politics as integrated and fundamental to how information flows, decisions are made, and power is distributed and wielded among organizational members;
- Strategic – positive perspective on organizational politics, in which participation is viewed as a proactive and effective strategy to accomplish objectives by leveraging informal relationships with others;
- Reluctant – view organizational politics as distasteful, but occasional participation is necessary in order to accomplish objectives; and
- Reactive – characterized by distancing oneself from political activity and engaging only when unable to avoid participation (Landells and Albrecht, 2017).

Davey (2008) offers a slightly different explanation for individuals' views on this topic, stating that organizational politics can often undermine and cast doubt on processes such as hiring and promotion, causing managers to deny having engaged in self-interested behaviours, and to downplay the impact of organizational politics. In this context, successful engagement in organizational politics can lead to greater power, implying that work performance is not the primary reason for which individuals are rewarded (Davey, 2008). This can result in what Kaya *et al.* (2016) describe as a negative view of organizational justice, in which resource and reward distribution do not follow predetermined organizational processes, leading employees to deem the organization and its representatives as unfair. Experiences that support this view suggest that gender can also affect how organizational politics are perceived, since women professionals tend to focus more on their performance as a means to success, rather than political activity (Davey, 2008; Doldor, 2011; Doldor, 2013; Martin and Barnard, 2013). This was the case in Davey's (2008) study that involved women in fields dominated by men, in which research participants described organizational politics as gendered, stating that the issues and political behaviours discussed were characterized as being either masculine or feminine.

A similar perspective is extended by Sultan *et al.* (2015), who found in their study that gender was a strong contributor to one's perception of organizational politics, and that women with greater job experience are likely to have been negatively influenced towards political working environments. The inequities and negatives that are perceived as resulting from political workplaces can cause harm to both individuals and organizations, creating environments where employees are hesitant to collaborate and choose to perform at minimal levels, believing that rewards will be allocated exclusively on political factors rather than merit (Gotsis and Kortezi, 2010).

Gotsis and Kortezi (2010) discuss the issue of how organizational politics is perceived by pointing to the concept of constructive politics, in which the individual engaging in political activity relies upon their political skill in order to address competing interests and motivations. The authors extend that the shift from negative to positive politics can occur by changing individuals' thinking and behaviours in five areas:

1. Abandoning self-serving priorities for organizational priorities;
2. Changing power-based relationships from control, through hierarchy and formal authority, to stewardship, in which a service mentality prevails;

3. Shifting from a model of manipulation to one of achievement of goals through shared values and ideals;
4. Changing perceptions of organizational relationships to ones of cooperation; and
5. Engaging in political activity that reflects morally acceptable behaviours (Gotsis and Kortezi, 2010, p. 505).

This view of organizational politics is shared by others who state that politics can be good when individuals engaging in political activity know how to use positive influence tactics and eschew negative behaviours when attempting to persuade others (Drory and Vigoda-Gadot, 2010).

One study, conducted by Landells and Albrecht (2017), identifies thirteen political behaviours that reflect political skill, which were grouped into five categories (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1: Political Behaviours

Category	Political Behaviours
1. Build and use relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use informal processes and relationships to get things done • Build key relationships and networks for future use • Build support coalitions for ideas, including lobbying
2. Observe and interpret decision-making contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpret the decision-making context (e.g. decision-making rationale, others' agendas, etc.) • Gather organizational information, including that which is shared as gossip
3. Manipulate and undermine others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undermine others (through bullying, harassing, withholding information, backstabbing, etc.) • Manipulate others (including hiding your motives)
4. Control decisions and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively protect your turf • Position yourself to control decisions • Empire building/gathering resources • Disregard others' advice
5. Build your personal reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build your personal reputation • Seek career progression

Another model of political skill is discussed by Perrewé and Nelson (2004) which encompasses four dimensions:

1. Social astuteness;
2. Interpersonal influence;
3. Networking ability; and
4. Sincerity.

Deloitte (2012) simplifies the classification of political behaviours into three groupings: persuasion, exchange and coercion. Of the thirteen behaviours described above, (Table 2.1), those in categories one, two and five would be deemed by Deloitte (2012) to be exchange tactics, while those in categories three and four would be classified as coercion. This points to a lack of persuasion tactics, which are associated with factual and emotional appeals, and which are also used more frequently by women than men (Deloitte, 2012). Regardless of how political behaviours are categorized, individuals with high political skill are expected to be able to adjust their behaviours in varying situations, influence others in particular directions, create relationships that allow them to take advantage of opportunities, and be perceived as trustworthy and genuine (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004; Doldor, 2017).

While positive behaviours can be identified within each framework, there are also negative ones that reinforce the view of organizational politics as being inherently bad. For example, networking and using relationships in order to accomplish goals that benefit the organization may be viewed positively, while leveraging those same relationships for personal gain is perceived negatively (Gotsis, and Kortezi, 2010; Landells and Albrecht, 2017). In response to this, the literature points to the ability to be sincere as the key determinant of how behaviours are perceived, stating those with high political skill respond in such a manner that their intentions are not questioned (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004; Watkins and Smith, 2014). Treadway *et al.* (2005) add another element to this concept with the inclusion of emotional labor, which they describe as the emotional investment made when selecting the appropriate behaviour for any given situation. In this context, acting in a way that is contrary to one's feelings about another individual constitutes high emotional labor, and may be challenging for those without sufficient political skill (Treadway *et al.*, 2005).

2.3 Women and Organizational Politics

Watkins and Smith (2014) point to political skill as a factor that enables women to attain positions of authority within masculine-dominated organizations. This suggests that, for women to be effective and achieve greater levels of both formal and informal authority, engagement in organizational politics is unavoidable, and avoidance of political tactics can limit one's career success (Davey, 2008). This can be challenging for some women given that many of the behaviours associated with both leadership and political acumen are those considered by many to be masculine (Doldor, 2013; Moor *et al.*, 2015; Wessel *et al.*, 2015; Bierema, 2017). While women are described as having communal traits such as being empathetic, nurturing, offering support, and building relationships, men are thought to have agentic traits, characterizing them as being results-oriented, competitive, independent, confident, and rational (Davey, 2008; Riker *et al.*, 2011; Moor *et al.*, 2015; Wessel *et al.*, 2015). Further, some authors suggest that while professional women acknowledge the need to engage in political activities, they may be reticent to do so because of a lack of confidence in behaving politically, and a general distaste for behaviours which they view as being competitive and irrational, and in some instances, even immoral (Davey, 2008; Doldor, 2013). Quimby (no date) provides a framework for this latter perspective, stating that the perception of organizational politics as good or bad can be linked to awareness and intentionality, as follows:

1. Amoral – encompasses the unconscious use of political influence to manipulate others without awareness of one's own motivation;
2. Immoral – describing the deliberate use of political power to influence others without awareness of one's own motivation; and
3. Moral – the conscious awareness and examination of one's own motivation before attempting to influence others.

In this context, it is possible that women may categorize political activity in one of the first two categories, leading them to eschew political engagement as a viable means of goal accomplishment. This points to a lack of political will, which governs individuals' motivation for engaging in political activities (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004; Shaughnessy *et al.*, 2017). This view is further supported by others who link political will with the desire for power, which is more frequently associated with men than with women (Treadway *et al.*, 2005; Martin and Barnard, 2013; Schuh *et al.*, 2013; Moor *et al.*, 2015; Pick, 2017). Deloitte (2012) describe this connection in even more explicit terms, stating that "power is inextricably associated with politics and the male sphere" (p. 5). It is possible that this connection between power

and politics may represent a significant barrier for some women, given that the pursuit of power and status has a stronger association with men (Pick, 2017). Rather than acting in pursuit of higher wages or positional power, the literature highlights women's commitment to relationships, and to making a difference; in other words, having a purpose that provides motivation for their actions (Longman and Lamm Bray, 2017).

When considering political activity in the context of reciprocity, Forret and Dougherty (2001) point out that women may be at a disadvantage because they frequently hold positions of lesser influence, leaving them with less to offer others. According to social exchange theory, this leaves women professionals in the position of being less attractive partners when seeking to engage in exchanges with men (Forret and Dougherty, 2001). Further, some suggest that relationships formed between men are often instrumental, meaning that they involve the exchange of favours, reinforcing the desire of some to pursue only relationships in which reciprocity is possible (Davey, 2008; Doldor, 2013; Watkins and Smith, 2014). This assertion aligns with the behavioural patterns ascribed to each gender, with women developing close relationships characterized by cooperation and support, while men act in ways to enhance their personal status (Kacmar *et al.*, 2011; Longman and Lamm Bray, 2017). This factor may contribute to organizational members' perceptions of organizational politics as a negative influence, despite the fact that reciprocity is one of the ways in which political activity can be constructive rather than destructive (Gotsis, and Kortezi, 2010). Additionally, those choosing not to engage in political behaviours as a result of this perspective may have less social capital than others, reducing their access to information, opportunities, and organizational resources, which in turn affects their effectiveness and access to positions of authority (Forret and Dougherty, 2001; Watkins and Smith, 2014). In this context, social capital is defined as the ability of an individual to access powerful networks and leverage relationships in order to access information, obtain resources, and garner opportunities (Forret and Dougherty, 2001; Stead and Elliott, 2012).

2.3.1 Masculinity and Femininity

The literature suggests that men may be unaware of how their views and behaviours affect the political climate within an organization (Doldor *et al.*, 2013). A possible explanation is offered within the definition of masculinity as domination over others, something which is frequently expressed as practices that subordinate women (Moller, 2007; Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). Included in this view of hegemonic masculinity are attributes such as an excessively competitive nature and greater access to

power (Moller, 2007). Within this perspective, it's suggested that social practices are ideologically legitimized and institutionalized to maintain the dominance of men over women (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Budgeon, 2014). This also reinforces the traditional view of femininity, which refers to characteristics and behaviours other than those demonstrated by men (Budgeon, 2014). In this context, hegemonic femininity appears as the receptivity of women to allow men a dominant position, reinforcing the traditional roles of both genders (Budgeon, 2014). This view is contradicted by Paechter (2006), who states that it is impossible to have a hegemonic version of femininity, since hegemony is about power, while femininity is perceived as being powerless. This perspective suggests that eschewing masculinity equates to, at minimum, a symbolic forfeiture of power, while eschewing femininity is the claiming of power (Paechter, 2006).

Male hegemony can create environments in which women must exceed the qualifications and performance standards expected of their counterparts who are men, contributing to the exclusion of women from positions of formal authority because the word "manager" is aligned with masculinity (Moor *et al.*, 2015; Thomas *et al.*, 2004; Willey, 2017). Crawford and Mills (2011) support this claim by asserting that in organizations in which men hold the majority of roles, masculine-dominant discourse becomes the norm, and then manifests itself as organizational routines and activities. While hegemonic masculinity, or the behaviours that men use to assert their dominance, may only be demonstrated by a minority of men, it's suggested that the impact can be broad-reaching in terms of the power position it reinforces over women (Paechter, 2006). It is not simply through men's behaviours that routines are created and reinforced, but also through the organizational practices that result. For example, Deloitte (2018) discusses the strategy of blind hiring, in which all gender cues are removed from the selection process, as an effective method of overcoming implicit bias to increase the number of women chosen. Implicit bias and stereotyping offer another possible explanation for some of the barriers that professional women face in the workplace, guiding individuals' decision making at an unconscious level while unintentionally disadvantaging women in processes such as hiring and succession planning (Deloitte, 2018). While the application of biases that negatively affect women may be perceived as a behaviour associated with men, Rudman and Glick (2001) highlight that both men and women endorse feminine stereotypes.

2.3.2 Challenges of Organizational Politics for Women

Researchers state that men view politics as a normal part of organizational life and use political tactics to their advantage (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004; Doldor, 2013). In contrast, women tend to rely on more formal organizational systems to accomplish tasks, and describe engagement in political activity as emotionally demanding, labelling behaviours as masculine norms which perpetuate the gendered nature of organizational politics (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004; Doldor *et al.*, 2013). This state of masculine-dominated organizational politics is referred to by Sharp *et al.* (2012) as 'sexual politics', which refers to the invisibility of men's power and dominance and remains unquestioned in the workplace. Research suggests that these types of masculine-dominated cultures can imbue women with feelings of inadequacy and defensiveness, and make them uneasy with power (Doldor, 2013, p. 199). This view is echoed by others who caution that masculine organizational norms can isolate women professionals, prompting them to leave and seek employment elsewhere, or to avoid certain fields altogether (Crawford and Mills, 2011; Sharp *et al.*, 2012).

Another factor that may limit women's participation in organizational politics is their inability to access informal networks, since membership is often based on topics that are of interest to men or represent men's shared experiences (Thomas *et al.*, 2004; Perrewé and Nelson, 2004). This can result in women's exclusion from forums where coalitions and alliances can be created, and valuable information can be gathered and exchanged with others (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004; Forret and Dougherty, 2001; Kantola, 2008). In some instances, this lack of access may contribute to women's negative views of organizational politics, since it can leave them in a position where they lack the information and resources needed to excel, thereby limiting their ability to demonstrate success and advance (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004).

Despite the potential unwillingness of professional women to engage in political activity, many women make the decision to adopt masculine behaviours, which can create irreconcilable tensions for them (Crawford and Mills, 2011; Martin and Barnard, 2013; Longman and Lamm Bray, 2017). In the context of masculine-dominated fields, this places women in the role of attempting to ungender a workplace through the virtue of holding roles traditionally held by men, while then reinforcing the current organizational culture by adopting masculine traits in order to be effective (Charles, 2014; Pick, 2017). In some cases, this paradox leads to criticism, with women professionals attempting to justify their actions to others (Davey, 2008; Pick, 2017). This may be in part due to the fact that men are more accepting of political activity, and both men and women tend to perceive politicians of their own gender more

positively (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004). In other instances, women lose credibility, making them ineffective, because of their conflicting attention to both supporting organizational norms while at the same time attempting to promote women's interests (Scala and Paterson, 2017).

Typically, women are most effective when behaving in ways that are true to their nature (Deloitte, 2012). Therefore, the adoption of masculine behaviours by women may end up being an unsuccessful strategy with the woman ultimately dealing with social sanctions, the disapproval of others, and censure for not being feminine enough (Crawford and Mills, 2011; Schuh *et al.*, 2013; Pick, 2017). This is in part due to the fact that while traits are often categorized as either agentic or communal, linking them with either men or women, these associations also guide others' expectations of men and women to behave in ways that align with these preconceptions (Wessel *et al.*, 2015). Kolb (2013) refers to this phenomenon as ascribing to gender schemas, which reflect the stereotypes that individuals associate with each gender. In addition to influencing individuals' expectations of each gender, these schemas have the ability to bias individuals' perceptions of men and women in areas such as performance and competence (Kolb, 2013; Pick, 2017).

Further, women often receive contradictory messages about the demonstration of traditionally-masculine characteristics, being told to be assertive, but not too assertive, and so forth (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004). This creates a challenging situation for women working in fields dominated by men, leaving them with an impossible choice between authenticity and acceptance, while at the same time inadvertently reinforcing gender stereotypes (Crawford and Mills, 2011; Kolb, 2013; Pick, 2017). This is echoed by others who point out that women face a difficult time trying to incorporate traditionally-masculine behaviours because their actions are viewed as upsetting the traditional relationship between the genders, resulting in the dismissal of their qualifications either on the basis of being too agentic, and not likable, or too communal, and not respected (Rudman and Glick, 2001; Budgeon, 2014). According to Rudman and Glick (2001) this paradox leaves women attempting to adopt some agentic traits, such as competitiveness, while eschewing others, such as dominance, in order to be accepted. Alternatively, it's suggested that under a modernized view of femininity, women are viewed as individuals, and traditionally-masculine traits are associated with individuality rather than with men (Budgeon, 2014).

2.4 Strategies to Enable Women

Moor *et al.* (2015) point to socialization as a key factor in women's abilities to be influential within masculine environments. The authors state that gender-neutral socialization, in which individuals are encouraged to develop androgynous personality traits, can help women develop the agentic and communal traits necessary for success. Among those characteristics found in the former category were self-confidence, assertiveness, ambition and being achievement-oriented, all of which are typically described as masculine traits, and which demonstrate an individual's ability to be independent and affect one's circumstances (Moor *et al.*, 2015). Communal traits, which include empathy, selflessness, kindness, supportiveness and friendliness, tend to be less valued in workplaces and are most often associated with femininity (Moor *et al.*, 2015; Wessel *et al.*, 2015; Longman and Lamm Bray, 2017). Kolb (2013) introduces the concept of second-generation gender bias, referring to embedded beliefs, structures and practices that appear neutral but favour men. The author suggests that it is this bias that can contribute to the devaluing of women's approaches in accomplishing tasks, regardless of the outcomes produced.

It is important to note in that in the study conducted by Moor *et al.* (2015) that it was not through the suppression of feminine or communal traits that women garnered more influence, but through the addition of agentic traits. This finding is similar to other studies in which participants identified an 'ideal' leader as possessing both feminine and masculine characteristics, and in which women who highlighted their agentic characteristics were more likely to get hired into fields dominated by men and leadership roles (Bruckmuller *et al.*, 2014; Wessel *et al.*, 2015). While the adoption of both masculine and feminine characteristics appears to be a potential solution for women, Willey (2017) cautions that unconscious biases may still lead individuals to perceive the same traits differently, depending on which gender demonstrates them. In those instances, feminine attributes embodied by men may be deemed as positive, while women embodying the same characteristics may be viewed negatively.

Aligned with the concept of gender neutrality, the literature recommends changes in organizational discourse, which often reflects language, such as terms and metaphors, that are traditionally masculine (Crawford and Mills, 2011; Kemp, 2016). Crawford and Mills (2011) base their recommendation on the fact that organizational discourse is more than a method of communicating information, both challenging and reinforcing beliefs, and contributing to the construction of organizational meaning. Grounded in organizational change and constructive social theory, Crawford and Mills (2011) extend the

idea that incremental changes in gender relations can be achieved through changes in workplace communication. A shift of this type would encompass the use of inclusive words such as “we”, and gender-neutral terms in place of words such as “him” when referring to someone in a position of authority (Crawford and Mills, 2011). A similar perspective is offered regarding language use in organizational documents, such as job postings, in role descriptions and associated behaviours are masculine in nature, leading some women to either be discriminated against or to self-select out of the running (Harvard Business Review, 2016). This move towards gender-neutral language seems a reasonable strategy if ascribing to the position that organizations are socially constructed and sustained through discourse, and that an organization’s dominant discursive practices reinforce existing power dynamics (Davey, 2008; Dick, 2013).

However, Sharp *et al.* (2012) challenge this view and state that, while there may be value in gender-neutral language, the use of it also allows deeper issues to be glossed over and ignored. This includes organizational beliefs and practices surrounding key concerns such as child-rearing, an area that is still frequently identified as a woman’s responsibility rather than something that is equally shared by both partners (Sharp *et al.*, 2012; Moor *et al.*, 2015). Similar concerns are extended by Martin and Phillips (2017) who recommend an alternative approach, gender blindness, in which discussions centre on similarities rather than differences, and focus on celebrating each gender’s individual traits instead of downplaying them. Building on this concept, but moving another step further still, is the concept of gender consciousness, in which the focus is on gender awareness and the implementation of actions targeted at improving women’s status (Bierema, 2017). Under this philosophy, the inequities between men and women would be addressed by operating in a state of conscious advocacy, reflecting both an awareness of gendered power relations and the willingness to act (Bierema, 2017). This state of conscious advocacy is achieved through the application of critical thinking, which encompasses:

1. Critical theory – challenges the dominant discourse that contributes to unequal power relations with the goal of emancipation for the oppressed group;
2. Critical thinking – challenges underlying beliefs and assumptions, with the objective of mitigating implicit bias in one’s thinking and actions; and
3. Critical action – taking mindful action, in a timely fashion, to address biases and related actions that marginalize an oppressed group (Bierema, 2017).

In order for the potential for organizational change to exist, Charles (2014) states that a greater representation of women is required in positions of power, challenging the notion that critical mass can occur at the 30% mark, and suggesting instead a need for at least 50% of roles to be occupied by women. This may be partly because of the tendency of those who benefit from the status quo - usually men - to resist change efforts (Crawford and Mills, 2011). Willey (2017) describes this as in-group or prejudice bias, in which certain individuals receive better treatment than those individuals who are outside of the group. Further, transformation is needed at the institutional level, and with the support of senior management, since changes at the individual level are not enough to alter the workplace culture (Crawford and Mills, 2011; Charles, 2014). Moor *et al.* (2015) extend a similar view, stating that the factors which support women professionals encompass three areas:

1. Society – encompassing organizational changes that allow for both genders to balance family and careers obligations;
2. Family – reflecting shifts in the traditional responsibilities of men and women with respect to home and family responsibilities; and
3. Individual – referring to an individual's development from childhood, during which time they are encouraged to develop both masculine and feminine traits.

Although individual changes are not enough for larger-scale culture changes to occur, women also have some ability to affect their circumstances. While the literature suggests that many women professionals lack the political will to engage in political behaviours, participating in political activity, and thereby increasing one's level of political skill, can not only provide career success, but also enhance one's confidence (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004). Political skill is cited as a key competence for those seeking more senior roles, in addition to allowing women to feel more confident about their ability to manage interactions and the impressions of others, which often results in reduced workplace stress (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004). A similar assertion is extended by Treadway *et al.* (2005), who state that the emotional labor involved in many settings can be reduced through greater political skill, since it offers the individual greater control over a situation and its outcome. While it is possible that some individuals inherently possess some level of political skill, it can also be further developed through activities such as mentoring, in which the relationship focuses on political acumen (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004). This would include the discussion of politics within the organization and field, informal sharing of information that protégés may otherwise not have access to, and assistance with barriers encountered (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004).

2.4.1 Leadership Development for Women

Further to the general strategies offered in the previous section, a great deal of focus is also placed on leadership development programs for women, which attempt to address the gendered nature of leadership, and the association that is frequently made between masculine traits and the model of what makes a leader. Stead and Elliott (2012) extend that traditional leadership development strategies, which reflect masculine norms, create challenges for aspiring women leaders. This is because women may find the promoted leadership behaviours to be in opposition to their socialization, and then find themselves labelled as unfeminine or judged harshly for their demonstration of masculine behaviours (Stead and Elliott, 2012). This view is echoed by Brue and Brue (2018) who go a step further, stating that traditional leadership development programs have the potential to punish women participants for their relational approach to leadership. Additionally, these programs may serve to promote gendered curriculums, which can marginalize women, and reinforce masculine practices (Swan *et al.*, 2009).

Brue and Brue (2018) state that the challenges facing men and women leaders are different, affecting aspects that include processing of information and the ways in which each gender connects with others. As such, they extend women's only leadership development (WOLD) programs as a solution, describing these as involving:

- Self-efficacy, which contributes to goal attainment;
- Feedback from multiple sources that provides evidence of one's effectiveness and allows refinement of one's leadership style; and
- Sufficient time to both learn and apply specific competencies, inside and outside of the classroom.

While the idea of women's leadership development programs (WLDPs) has been around since the 1970s, some extend that the content and design of these programs is limiting, focused simply on socializing women to operate in a masculine world in a "fix the women" approach (Ely *et al.*, 2011). While agency is important, Ely *et al.* (2011) highlight two necessary, and often missing, components for these types of programs: the creation of leader identity, in which women perceive themselves as leaders, and the development of a higher sense of purpose, which is tied to helping others and aligned with their personal values. The authors contend that the development of these two critical pieces is often hindered by a lack of available role models for women, and the lack of freedom to experiment and receive feedback when trying out leadership behaviours to develop one's personal leadership style (Ely *et al.*, 2011).

To address some of the challenges of aspiring women leaders, the literature highlights strategies that include:

- Securing mentors to gain entry into powerful networks and to build greater confidence and see leadership in action;
- Participation in women-only networks where support is available for the issue of dealing with gender bias; and
- Critical reflection focused on understanding the impact of gender and power, with the goal of developing action plans (Stead and Elliott, 2012; Brue and Brue, 2018).

These strategies are in alignment with other research that highlights the lesser access of women into networks of powerful individuals, especially those of the same gender, which are one of the ways in which men access informal assistance and access to leadership opportunities (Ely *et al.*, 2011).

Additionally, initiatives such as organizationally-sponsored mentorship programs for women are an example of “fix the system” changes, in which the focus moves away from fixing women because they are deficient, to fixing a deficient organizational structure (Clayton, 2011).

When it comes to the topic of women’s only leadership development programs, the literature suggests that these should include:

- 360-degree feedback, paired with coaching that assists women in identifying and dealing with gender stereotypes;
- Strategies to expand women’s networks through increased networking opportunities;
- Discussions about gender bias and ways to address its effects;
- Structured reflection time allowing women to consider, and share barriers being faced in their leadership journey;
- A broader definition of negotiation, and opportunities to practice the associated skills to push back on gendered organizational structures and develop a sense of empowerment;
- Skills related to leading change, especially in the area of second-generation gender bias; and
- Preparing women to make the transition into a leadership role (Ely *et al.*, 2011; Selzer *et al.*, 2017).

A slightly different view regarding WLDPs is offered by Sugiyama *et al.* (2016) who suggest that leadership development in general is shifting towards a greater emphasis on identity and relational leadership, which may eventually eliminate the need for women’s only programs. They extend, for

example, that the change to experiential learning as part of leadership development addresses several of the factors that make women's only programs unique; this includes activities such as 360-degree feedback, mentoring relationships, networking, and project-based assignments underpinned by action learning (Sugiyama *et al.*, 2016). Despite the apparent overlaps in content, Sugiyama *et al.* (2016) also acknowledge that differences still exist in how the knowledge shared is received and applied by participants. An example of this is the emphasis in general leadership development programs (GLDPs) on networks as a method of attaining business advantages, versus the view expressed in WLDPs as networks being places to receive support from others (Sugiyama *et al.*, 2016). This item in particular may be viewed as one reason why WLDPs are desirable, given that the connectedness that occurs for women participating in these programs aligns with communal traits, allowing women to act in accordance with traditional gender roles (DeFrank-Cole *et al.*, 2016).

2.5 Conclusion

The objective of this literature review was to gain a fuller understanding of both organizational politics and gender, and how the interplay between the two may place women professionals at a disadvantage within the workplace, leading to less power and career success for women. Additionally, this review aims to understand the unique challenges that confront women who choose to work within masculine-dominated professions, organizations, and sectors. As such, the research explored was focused by the following questions:

- What effect does gender have on individuals' engagement in organizational politics?
- What impact does organizational politics have on women's abilities to access formal and informal power in the workplace?
- What can women do to engage in organizational politics more effectively?

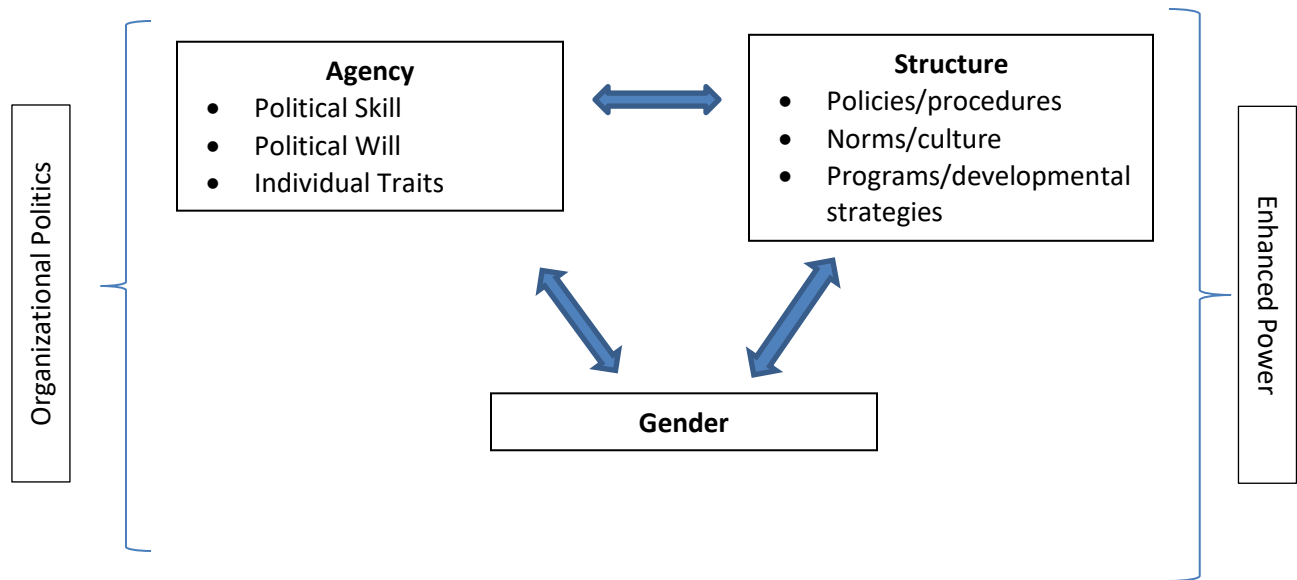
The current literature on organizational politics and gender suggests that while women professionals may be at a disadvantage when engaging in political tactics, there are some women who manage to succeed, even when employed within fields dominated by men (Watkins and Smith, 2014). This success appears to be linked to some extent to both political will and political skill. While political skill can be increased through practice, it has been argued that political will may be greater in men than in women, partially due to the masculine nature of political actions, and partially due to women's experiences with organizational politics (Davey, 2008; Drory and Vigoda-Gadot, 2010; Sultan *et al.*, 2015; Landells and Albrecht, 2017). This suggests that women may participate in organizational politics less frequently,

resulting in missed opportunities to gain information, resources, and power (Forret and Dougherty, 2001; Perrewé and Nelson, 2004; Watkins and Smith, 2014).

The literature highlights the fact that many organizational cultures reflect a predominance of masculine norms, which influence not only organizational routines and practices, but also the informal conversations that characterize political activity (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004; Doldor *et al.*, 2013). Some suggestions are offered to women to deal with this situation, such as the adoption of androgynous traits, while other ideas require organizational changes with the support of senior leaders (Moor *et al.*, 2015). In this latter category, recommendations include mentoring programs that focus on the development of political acumen, an increase in the number of women in senior roles, changes in organizational discourse that reflects gender-neutral language, and women's only leadership development programs (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004; Crawford and Mills, 2011; Ely *et al.*, 2011; Charles, 2014; Brue and Brue, 2018). The recommendations offered suggest that this issue requires action at multiple levels, and that change may be difficult to affect in masculine-dominated fields given the interests of those concerned in maintaining the status quo (Rudman and Glick, 2001; Crawford and Mills, 2011; Moor *et al.*, 2015).

In summary, the literature reviewed offers perspectives that sometimes conflict, highlighting a lack of agreement about the positive or negative nature of organizational politics, contradictory views about the effectiveness of individuals engaging in political behaviour, and no clear answer about the strategies that women can employ to access greater power. Further, it suggests that men and women may experience different professional outcomes because they engage in, and experience organizational politics differently. The insights gained through this literature review have resulted in an understanding of the relationship between organizational politics and power, which is articulated as the theoretical framework for this project (Figure 2.1). In this framework, I perceive organizational politics as a combination of individuals' agency, (arising from individuals' skills, will and traits), and structure, comprised of the policies, norms and developmental strategies present within the workplace. Both agency and structure are influenced by gender, whereby expectations and interpretations of individuals' actions are guided by gender stereotypes, and organizational practices and norms can appear gendered in nature, unconsciously providing advantages to one sex while disadvantaging the other. Successful navigation of these factors equals effective engagement in organizational politics, which in turn produces enhanced power for those acting politically.

Figure 2.1: Theoretical Framework



Further, this review of the literature has provided me with greater clarity, leading me to refine the focus of my research project as follows:

Primary Research Question:

What impact does organizational politics have on women’s abilities to access formal and informal power in the workplace?

Supporting Research Questions:

1. How does organizational politics facilitate or inhibit professional women from accessing power?
2. How can professional women engage in organizational politics more effectively?

The next chapter describes the approach used to seek answers to these questions, along with the rationale for the choices made.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Previous chapters have described the scope of this research study, stating the questions being answered, and the information available within the current literature on this and related topics. What follows is a description of the methods applied during this study, a discussion of action research, along with the rationale for the selection of the methods employed.

3.1 Research Approach & Philosophical Position

Action research is described as an iterative process of data collection, meaning-making, planning and taking action, and assessment of the outcomes produced (Stringer, 1999). By integrating theory and practice in a structured way, it enables the collaborative collection and verification of data for the benefit of both those involved as well as audiences beyond the scope of the research project (Rigg and Coghlan, 2016; Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). It is labelled as being less a method of data collection, than it is an approach to problem-solving, thus allowing the researcher to employ a variety of research methods (O'Brien, 2001). Further, its origins identify it as a way of testing social sciences' theories, linking the quality of the results produced to their effectiveness in practice (Carr, 2006). Unlike some other forms of research where creating knowledge is paramount, action research places emphasis on the creation of positive change, in which disadvantaged groups are aided (Greenwood and Levin, 2003). This objective is accomplished with the involvement and action of those affected, and it is through this action-taking process that individuals' situations are changed and knowledge is generated (Greenwood and Levin, 2003).

In their discussion of the three audiences of research, Reason and Marshall (1987) identify these audiences as being: for me, for us, and for them. The "for us" audience is addressed in action research through second-person inquiry and practices, with the objective of producing relevant learning to address issues of concern for those involved (Reason and Marshall, 1987). Attention to this audience provided the opportunity for participants in this study to be beneficiaries of the research, by giving them the chance to affect their circumstances or environment through their participation. This meant that the actions being implemented were expected to create positive change for the participants, rather than simply producing research data for this study (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). The actions of the researcher inquiring into the situation generates first-person learning, stemming from the researcher's inquiry into their own assumptions, behaviours and intentions (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). This

process is described by some as transformative learning, which can bring awareness to perspectives and assumptions that were previously hidden (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005). Bawden and Williams (2017) point to this transformative nature as being key, stating that it is by changing our perspectives that we change our actions. Further, it is suggested that the researcher's involvement in second-person inquiry deepens first-person inquiry; this stems from the accountability developed to a group of people, which motivates one's participation in inquiry rather than avoiding the challenging process of questioning one's identity (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005). It is the third audience, "for them", that typically attends to the third person, resulting in generalizable knowledge for others; the literature suggests this third-person knowledge results from the experiences of the other two (Reason and Marshall, 1987; Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). As such, the goal of scholar-practitioners engaged in action research is to learn about themselves while taking action, create change in collaboration with others, and to produce knowledge that is useful to other scholars and practitioners (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014).

Action research is described as following a cyclical style that varies from "look, think, act", to the more complex description of action planning, feedback, data-gathering, diagnosis and action (Stringer, 1999, p. 18; Coghlan and Brannick, 2014, p. 9). These cycles continue in an iterative fashion, with participants encouraged to continuously assess the outcomes of their actions, reflect on the resulting learning, and to use that knowledge to take new action in order to affect change (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). The objective of this study was to better understand how organizational politics affect professional women, specifically their ability to access informal and formal power. Given the cyclical and participative nature of action research, this approach provided the opportunity for participants in this study to be beneficiaries of the research, by giving them the chance to affect their circumstances or environment through their participation. This meant that the actions being implemented were expected to create positive change for the participants, rather than simply producing research data for this study (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014).

Action research exists in several forms, including contextual action research and radical action research (O'Brien, 1998). For example, in radical action research, the focus is on social transformation, and includes a sub-set called feminist action research, which advocates for positive changes for women. While, on the surface, this study seems aligned with feminist action research, contextual action research, specifically an action learning process, was pursued instead due to the focus on individual

action and transformation, rather than larger-scale societal changes. While some differences exist between the various action modalities, all forms generally involve affected individuals as active participants in generating change, encourage reflection-in-action to create learning and test mental models, and support double-loop learning (Raelin, 2009; Dewar and Sharp, 2006). This focus on participative involvement, along with an emphasis on problem-solving, was used to provide incentive for those participating in this study.

Despite many years of research, it is still difficult to understand with certainty whether the presence of political behaviour is positive or negative, and whether those engaging in political behaviours are effective, and acting in the best interests of an organization (Forret and Dougherty, 2001; Drory and Vigoda-Gadot, 2010; Doldor et al., 2013). Gender further complicates this situation, with researchers extending a variety of factors that both hinder and help professional women succeed and access formal and informal power. Within the primarily masculine-dominated oil and gas industries in Calgary, women frequently comment on the “old boys’ network”, referring to the strong relationships between men that seem to provide opportunities to peers of the same gender, and make it difficult for women to get ahead. One reason for this may be men’s engagement in organizational politics, which appears to occur differently than for professional women. As such, this study sought to understand the impact of organizational politics on women’s abilities to access informal and formal power within the workplace. In support of this objective, this project was focused on the identification of answers to the following two questions:

1. How does organizational politics facilitate or inhibit professional women from accessing power?
2. How can professional women engage in organizational politics more effectively?

Implicit with the objectives of this study is the belief that while some commonalities may exist, each professional woman’s experience is unique and, therefore, reflects a different reality. This view is contrary to the positivistic stance that reflects:

1. An ontological view that reality is objective and external, and;
2. An epistemological view that significant knowledge is based on observations on external reality (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012, p. 22).

Conducting research is a form of knowledge-seeking, and an individual’s epistemology affects how an individual seeks to understand the world, and which knowledge is perceived as having value (Johnson

and Duberley, 2000; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012). This means that the researcher's choice of data collection and interpretation is often influenced by their epistemology, along with other logistical factors such as cost, time, and access to study participants (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012). While positivism has traditionally been used in management and organizational research, social constructionism has been gaining greater acceptance, and expanding the view that reality is socially constructed, meaning that it can never be fully understood and captured (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012; Hendricks, 2013). Where positivism places the researcher outside of the situation being studied, social constructionism has the researcher as part of the situation as they gather data about the different meanings that people create as a result of their experiences (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012). It is this latter view that I share, and which influenced my selection of research methods.

Methods that are linked to positivism are those that generate "hard" data, such as numeric and factual information, while constructionism is marked by methods that produce "soft" data, which includes textual and numeric information, and discourses around individuals' experiences (Shah and Corley, 2006; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012). In positivism, data collection often reflects quantitative research methods, which involve large samples, with the objective being to test hypotheses and generalize results beyond the population of a study (Trochim, 2006; Hendricks, 2013). Qualitative research is typically associated more with constructionism, with the objective being to collect and interpret data within the context in which it is gathered (Hendricks, 2013). Despite these relationships between epistemology and methodology, constructionists may choose to use a mix of both qualitative and quantitative research methods to collect multiple viewpoints and understand the different realities present (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012). This process of triangulation may provide greater understanding of the phenomenon being studied since it can provide insights into both the relationships and patterns that are present, and an explanation of those patterns (Scandura and Williams, 2000; Shah and Corley, 2006; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, a mixed method approach may improve the validity of results and reduce researcher bias (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012; Thorpe and Holt 2012).

Despite the described benefits of the mixed method approach, the structure of this research study embraced a social constructionist approach, seeking to collect data that was rich in detail and provided insight into participants' experiences within the context of their particular workplace. To that end, this study involved two methods of data collection, both of which were qualitative: action learning sets and individual interviews with learning set participants. Participation in these data collection activities was

voluntary, although individuals agreeing to be part of the action learning sets were asked to also allow themselves to be interviewed when the action learning meetings ended. The learning sets enabled participants to complete the iterative cycles representative of action research, while taking action in ways that would affect their individual circumstances. The data from both the learning set discussions and individual interviews provided additional insights into both of the questions posed above, within the specific context of the participants' workplace.

3.2 Qualitative Data

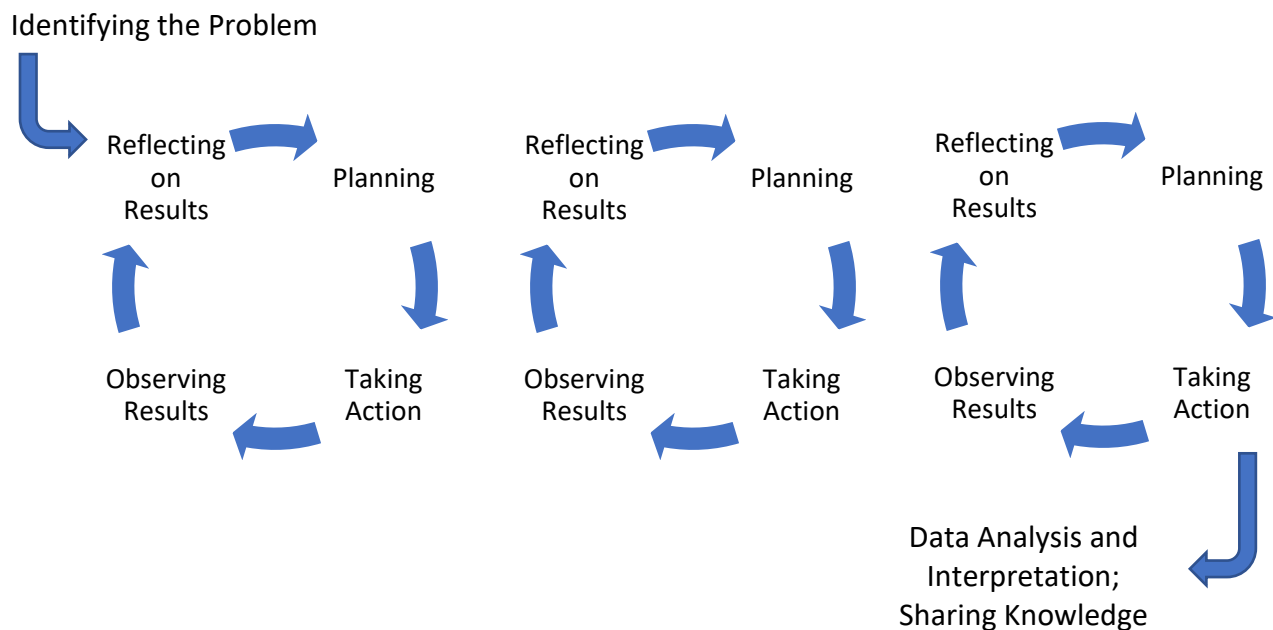
3.2.1 Action Learning

Action learning is contextual problem-solving, with those affected acting in collaboration to learn from real-life experiences and taking informed action as a result of their learning (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011; Herasymowich and Senko, 2003). On the surface, there are many commonalities between action learning and action research, since both include problem-solving, learning, inquiry, and reflecting on actions taken (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). The key differences between the two are the rigour and methodology of action research, which governs data collection and analysis, and that the results of the research are made public (McGrath and O'Toole, 2016; Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). In action learning, individuals come together regularly, commonly in learning sets of 5-8 people, all of whom commit to taking action and are accountable for the results they produce (Herasymowich and Senko, 2003; Dewar and Sharp, 2006). Further, action learning is offered as a method of understanding the impacts of gender and power, factors that were both identified as being relevant for women's leadership development during the literature review (Stead, 2014). Action learning principles were embraced in this study through the creation of a learning set, comprised of six women, who met once/month for seven months. The time between meetings allowed for participants to take action, and reflect on the learning and results produced, so that these could be shared at subsequent meetings. In this context, the actions taken by participants in this study signified those ways in which each woman sought to improve her political engagement, reflecting the philosophy of both action research and action learning of 'taking action to create change'.

In this action research study, the iterative cycles of action research were prefaced by the process of identifying the problem to address, and concluded with an overall analysis and interpretation of the data collected (Figure 3.1). This process produced knowledge "for them", representing generalizable knowledge that may be useful for others. I participated in each step of each iterative cycle, collected and

analyzed data as it was generated, and sought additional understanding by also referencing new literature, which in turn informed my next cycle of planning for action. This participation generated learning “for me” as the researcher who was both involved in and observing the process. As such, each cycle contributed to my personal learnings that are shared in Section 5.2 of this paper, and informed my conclusions about the use of action research and action learning for addressing problems of this type.

Figure 3.1: Action Research Cycles



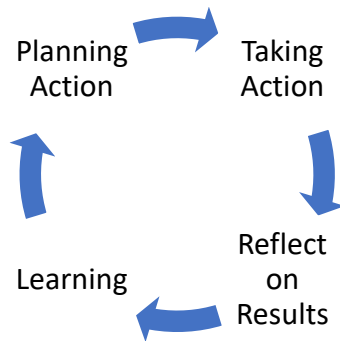
Within each cycle of this action research project, an action learning cycle occurs. Each action learning cycle represents the intervention taken by learning set participants, which is intended to create change and learning “for me” and “for us”. It is in these iterative cycles of action learning where one can see the similarities between action research and action learning (Figure 3.2).

The action learning steps can be described as follows:

- Planning Action: determining what action or intervention to try; identifying the steps involved.
- Taking Action: implementing the planned actions.
- Reflect on Results: reflecting on what happened as a result of the actions taken; identifying underlying feelings and beliefs, aided by questions posed by other participants; recognizing what worked well and what did not.

- Learning: identifying factors that contributed to the results produced; recognizing mental models that hindered or supported the outcome produced; discussing any changes in understanding about the problem being addressed.

Figure 3.2: Action Learning Cycle



Dewar and Sharpe (2006) offer several principles to guide the action learning process, including:

- The involvement of others to aid in the processes of learning and reflection by posing questions that support critical inquiry;
- A commitment by those participating to take actions geared at improving the situation; and
- An acknowledgement that the process involves both challenging others and being challenged by others.

This collaborative nature of action research and action learning was addressed in several ways during this research project. First, the group developed a set of ground rules, (Appendix 4), that governed all of their discussions during the first learning set meeting. As the facilitator, I offered an initial set of items to the learning set for their review and discussion. This list was refined by the group, with additions being made along with minor adjustments to the initial language of the ground rules presented. Of special concern was the matter of confidentiality since the women wanted to ensure that their participation did not impact the reputation of their organization or their standing within the department. Another matter that was discussed, but dismissed by the group, was that of the formal reporting relationship that existed between five of the six women. The learning set expressed their confidence that their relationships with one another were such that they believed the formal reporting structure would have no impact on their participation. These were reviewed at the beginning of each meeting, and set members were invited to add new items to the list if they felt they were needed. Next, the set discussed

and created a common definition of the term “organizational politics” to ensure a shared understanding regarding the topic of study. This discussion occurred during the first learning set meaning and was critical to ensuring a shared understanding of the topic being explored. Additionally, this conversation led into a discussion of each woman’s reason for participating in this study, and confirmed the common, overarching objective of wanting to become better political actors.

Third, the group created a system map during the first meeting, which was reviewed again following the final learning set meeting, allowing participants to identify ways in which their actions had created change, highlighting the presence of new, positive archetypes, and the absence of some negative archetypes which had been identified when the map was originally developed. This was done in response to the literature that states there is value in creating shared terms of reference that can be used to understand the problem being addressed by an action learning set (Senge, 2006, Brown, 2008; Stacey, 2011; Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). Further, Senge (2006) suggests that the power to change situations stems from the ability to affect the systemic structures present, which requires the ability to see how each individual interacts with the larger system. Organizational systems are said to be vulnerable to change in specific areas, pointing to actions described as leverage points where interventions are more likely to succeed (Herasymowich and Senko, 2002). Identification of these leverage points, which frequently coincide with negative archetypes, aids the process of action planning by highlighting the best potential intervention from the variety of possible ideas being considered. Herasymowich and Senko (2002) state that systems maps can also be used to anticipate both the positive and unintended consequences of actions, further informing the planning process and enabling learning set participants to take steps to mitigate any expected negative results (Herasymowich and Senko, 2002). Development of the learning set’s systems maps was undertaken with all of these goals in mind, with the intention that the maps would be used throughout the duration of this research project. Mapping the organizational system was a process that I facilitated, using a modified set of positive and negative archetype that will be discussed further in the next chapter (Table 4.7).

Lastly, participants were asked to make a commitment to the participative nature of action learning in which they were expected to identify and take action, discuss the results, and reflect upon and share their learnings. In those instances where no action was taken, learning set members were still expected to explain why and to reflect upon their reasons for inaction. It was through this process that knowledge was identified and shared, and through which changes occurred. This last item was of key importance

and provided participants with the incentive to participate, namely the benefit of improving their circumstances through the actions they committed to take each month.

3.2.2 Selection of Participants

Action research is intended to be carried out with the participation of both the researcher and the stakeholders who are seeking to create some type of improvement (Greenwood and Levin, 2007). In this fashion, those participating in the study become co-researchers alongside the primary researcher or facilitator (Dewar and Sharpe, 2006). For this research project, participants in the action learning sets were drawn from an organization that is external to the researcher, and which fit the criterion of being masculine-dominated. This organization was one of two that I considered, both because of their masculine-dominated cultures and because of the strong relationship I had with the clients. In both instances, I had preliminary conversations with my contact at each organization to inquire about the interest in participating in my research. While both were interested, I decided not to pursue things further with one organization due to the internal restructuring and layoffs that were occurring, concerned that participants drawn from this client's employee population might lose their jobs partway through the study.

As Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2012) point out, it can be challenging for external researchers to negotiate access to a research site and study participants for a variety of reasons, including:

1. Organizational relevance and benefit;
2. Resource and time commitments;
3. Political sensitivity of the study; and
4. The reputation of the organization and individuals involved (p. 90).

To overcome these barriers, I provided information about this study to my contact at the one organization that I was still hoping to partner with. This included a description of my objectives, the methodologies that I planned to employ, and an overview of the commitment needed from participants. Following this initial exchange of information with my contact, discussions then progressed with two levels of management who considered my request to conduct research within their organization. While the organization I had targeted ultimately declined to participate in the study, citing too great a time commitment, they still allowed me to solicit participants from their employee population, with the understanding that those individuals would have to participate during their personal time. I chose to

accept their terms, since I had little leverage as an external researcher to push for greater access, and felt I was limited to organizations with whom I had a pre-existing relationship since these would be most likely to allow me in. Additionally, I was aware from conversations with other employees of this organization that it was rare for them to allow access to researchers due to their status as a public service organization and their sensitivity to reputational concerns. Following the organization's approval, along with ethics approval from the university, I provided detailed information to my contact who agreed to disseminate it to employees within the department that I hoped to draw participants from. The details of the information provided to potential participants is fully described later in this chapter in the section that deals with ethics.

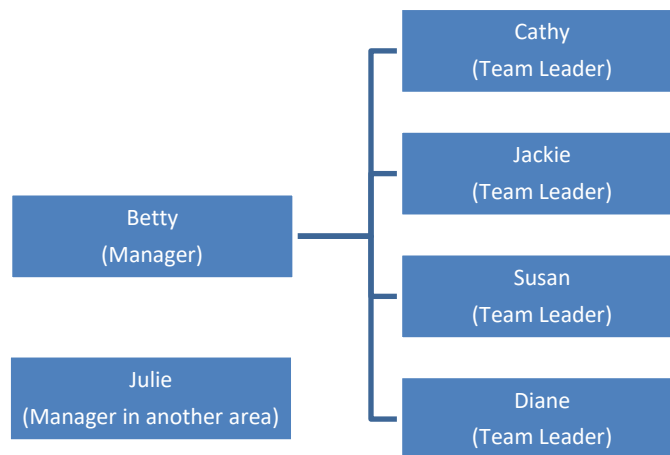
While my approach enabled anyone within the department to potentially participate, I limited participation to those individuals who met the following criteria:

1. Women; and
2. Currently working in a supervisory role, defined as having direct reports along with other managerial responsibilities.

A third criterion, that of being employed within an industry dominated by men, was satisfied by approaching a specific department that reflected this trait, within the organization, from which study participants were drawn. As a result, the people who participated in the learning sets were women, all of whom held supervisory positions and possessed a desire to improve their level of political engagement. At the onset of the learning set meetings, I found out that this desire was fueled by recent changes in the department, in which two senior leadership roles had once again been given to men, which the participants stated was a missed opportunity to introduce greater diversity into the leadership ranks. Further, they cited the need to enhance their credibility with their male colleagues, especially since their roles placed them in support positions to the rest of their department, and they believed that their expertise in matters was often ignored or overruled, even in matters which fell within their scope of responsibility. The women were all members of a public service organization that operates within Alberta, Canada, and all of them were employed within the same department. The department's function placed it within a masculine-dominated field, where many employees held traditionally masculine positions such as engineers. Five of the six women were members of one team, while the sixth worked in another area, but frequently collaborated with the others. Of the women who belonged

to the same team, one held the position of manager over the other four, and this group of five women represented the full team (Figure 3.3). All of the women in this study knew each other beforehand and had varying levels of relationships forged with one another.

Figure 3.3: Research participants



3.2.3 Interviews

Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2012) state that in-depth interviews can produce additional insights into each person's experiences. This greater understanding may result for one or both of the following reasons:

1. Interviews may produce an explanation of individuals' behaviours that point to their motivation and underlying attitudes; and
2. Interviews may produce deeper understanding of a topic from a particular group's perspective (Rosenthal, 2016).

For this study, both of the above were desired outcomes which led to individual interviews, conducted with the participants of the action learning sets at the conclusion of the sets. These individual interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of their experiences, and revealed further insights about how the actions taken had influenced participants' effectiveness in behaving politically and accessing greater informal power.

While researchers typically begin interviews with some predetermined questions, it is common for these to fluctuate based on participants' responses (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, Cresswell (2013)

recommends researchers begin with an interview guide, containing a set of 5 to 7 questions, and room for answers to be recorded. In structured interviews, the same questions will be posed to everyone being interviewed, in the same order, and without any probing questions aimed at gaining further understanding of a response (Cresswell, 2013). By comparison, unstructured interviews invite those being interviewed to 'tell their story', with the interviewer commenting, as needed, to keep an individual focused on a specific topic (Compton, 2005). The semi-structured interview combines elements of both the structured and unstructured interview. It begins with a set of questions and allows the interviewer latitude to ask them in whatever order enables the respondent to share their story (Compton, 2005). Additionally, the interview may ask additional questions or comment to gather additional information about the respondent's answers.

In this study, a semi-structured approach was employed, beginning with a pre-determined set of twelve questions, with clarification questions posed as needed in response to individuals' answers. The initial ten questions posed focused on participants' experiences during their involvement in the learning set. Two additional questions asked specifically about the process used for learning set meetings. Questions were sequenced in a logical, structured fashion, that was not always adhered to, but which allowed for what Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2012) describe as "unbroken discussion". Further, the questions posed were tested and refined prior to starting the interviews. These interviews were conducted face-to-face in January and February, 2017.

The interview protocol, which can be viewed in Appendix 5, contains the standard set of questions used. This set of core questions inquired about four general themes: political skill, political will, supportive organizational practices, and individual insights. First, participants were asked about their ability to behave politically, and to identify behaviours that others used effectively when engaging in organizational politics. Questions related to this theme provided data about participants' political skill, and highlighted behaviours of other skilled political actors. Second, individuals were asked to identify challenges encountered when acting politically, and discuss those misconceptions or assumptions which had prevented them from behaving politically in the past. These questions provided insight into participants' level of political will, and the attitudes that influenced their motivation to engage in political behaviours. Third, respondents were asked to describe the political climate within their workplace, and comment on organizational supports that would enhance their engagement in organizational politics. While the previous questions had been focused on respondents' agency in

changing their situation, those centred around this third theme sought to identify positive changes to affect the structure of their environment. Fourth, participants were asked to identify how they had changed over the course of this study, and how their behaviours had been affected, as a result. The interviews lasted approximately one hour, and interviewees allowed me to take extensive typed notes of their responses, which were incorporated into the overall thematic analysis.

3.2.4 Data Analysis

When analysing qualitative data, the three general steps involved are organization, coding according to themes or categories, and interpretation of the data (Glesne, 2006; Cresswell, 2013). The action learning sets produced pages of handwritten notes, that I had captured during each of the learning set meetings. Additionally, I had photos of the systems maps that had been created, which I reproduced afterwards in electronic format. Responses shared during the individual interviews were typed verbatim as the women answered the interview questions and were saved electronically on my laptop. In this instance, I chose to keep the notes from the action learning sets separate from those collected during the individual interviews, and to code each separately to see if both sets of data offered similar information. Jacelon and O'Dell (2005) state that the processes of data collection and analysis often overlap, and this was my experience during this project. Although the formal theming of data was done at the end of the data collection process, I reviewed the notes taken during the learning sets at the end of each meeting, highlighting any patterns that emerged, and comparing them to previous meeting notes. Further, notes regarding potential links to the literature were identified following each action learning set and each interview, which provided initial ideas when developing a coding framework. This process was further aided by referencing the theoretical framework I had developed, which offered a preliminary structure and potential themes. To counter potential researcher bias, I maintained a journal throughout this research project where I added my own observations and highlighted potential biases. This process was guided by the following reflection questions (Glesne, 2006. p. 166):

1. What did I notice?
2. Why did I notice this?
3. How can I interpret what I noticed?
4. How do I know that my interpretation is correct?

Ryan and Bernard (2003) state that multiple reviews of the data aids in the theming process. As such, at the conclusion of both data collection phases, I spent time reviewing all of the notes taken, which

represented 53 pages of information. This review was to once more familiarize myself with all of the data, and to add new comments, or revise existing comments, regarding my impressions of the data. Thomas (2006) suggests that this form of repeated review enables researchers to begin recognising themes by identifying those ideas that appear frequently, dominate over other ideas, or are significant in some fashion. A review of the relevant literature allowed me to develop an initial coding framework, by highlighting the key categories of political will and political skill. Additionally, the literature offered language to describe some of the identified themes, such as gender bias and masculine characteristics. Although my initial coding framework was informed by the literature, thereby reflecting some of the items in my theoretical framework, I was also careful to allow for flexibility and evolution of my identified codes, heeding O’Leary’s (2004) caution regarding the potential pitfall of making the data fit my predetermined categories. This was avoided through the addition of new codes or descriptors reflecting the ideas that emerged, rather than attempting to make my data fit into the categories initially identified.

Using this draft framework, I undertook the process of coding, or the process of identifying the ideas contained within each piece of raw data for the purpose of categorization (Jacelon and O’Dell, 2005). This allowed me to group all of the data from the learning sets and individual interviews by the themes described in Table 3.1. Next, in a variation on the cutting and sorting technique described by Ryan and Bernard (2003), short segments of anonymized textual data from the learning sets were transcribed onto post-it notes and presented on sheets of flipchart paper. With the objective of minimizing researcher bias and, this version of the data was shared with learning set members, who had agreed to come together a final time to provide input on the theming process. LeCompte (2000) suggests that sharing research findings with study participants in this manner can enhance the reliability and validity of one’s findings. Additional categorization of the data resulted from this meeting, with some items being shifted to different categories. Overall, the majority of the items remained untouched, and no changes were made to either the categories of themes or their definitions. As such, I view this discussion as offering further insights and understanding into the data, by supporting and confirming the interpretation process.

Table 3.1: Structure of coding framework

Theme	Sub-theme	Definition
Political Will	Purpose	The desired outcome that motivates an individual to engage in political activity, and the alignment of this purpose with one's values.
	Intention	The reasons for an individual's decision to engage in, or disengage from, political activity, based on perceptions of political actors.
	Confidence	Demonstrated belief of the individual in their level of knowledge, experience, and ability to make valued contributions in the workplace.
	Self-talk	The thoughts an individual is experiencing regarding their skills, knowledge and value, that impact their actions and decisions.
Political Skill	Political Behaviours	The demonstration of behaviours that represent political engagement, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistence • Decisiveness • Assertive communication • Building alliances
	Gender Bias	The influence of gender stereotypes on the perception of others' actions, and expectations of how individuals should behave, in the areas of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Relationships • Valuing feminine characteristics
Organizational Politics & Context	Individual Attitudes and Perceptions of Organizational Politics	Individual and organizational beliefs about the nature, value and outcomes of organizational politics.
	Working Environment	Organizational culture and its associated norms, practices, and systems that represent and reinforce that culture.

While I believed that the coding framework to be accurate at this point it was, in reality, further refined and finalized through continued rounds of data analysis, and while planning the Findings chapter of this thesis when additional connections between the data became apparent. Ryan and Bernard (2003) note the importance of this step, stating that researchers must eventually determine the interrelationships between themes. This refinement process entailed the use of descriptors, which reflected individual ideas, and that were assigned to various portions of notes and text. In some instances, descriptors were later grouped together, when it became apparent that they represented sub-themes within a single category. For example, codes used during the first and second rounds of review included 'likability', 'presence', 'personality', and 'characteristics'. Over time, these were identified as political behaviours,

and placed as a sub-set of political skill. Similarly, gender, or the influence of stereotypes on the interpretations of leaders' actions, became a subset of political skill in my coding framework, rather than remaining a top-level category as was described in my theoretical framework. The final coding framework can be viewed in Appendix 6.

Ritchie *et al.* (2013) point to the need to retain the data collected in context, which can be lost when a researcher applies the 'cut and paste' method to their data. A solution to this is the process of thematic charting, in which data is entered into a table according to its category (theme), and also by respondent (Ritchie *et al.*, 2013). This approach is described as offering greater insights into individual cases, by uncovering associations and potential explanations that are not apparent through the process of theme identification alone (Ritchie *et al.*, 2013). For this reason, once the data coding process was complete, the data from the individual interviews was mapped to specific responses shared during the learning sets. An example of this is offered in Table 3.2. This was accomplished by applying my personal knowledge, as the researcher, of certain contributions by participants during the learning set meetings. This allowed the development of a narrative that offered a view of each participant's learning and development over the course of the study. Areas of development discovered included attitudinal changes regarding organizational politics and shifts in participants' willingness to engage in political behaviours, along with insights into the rationale for these changes. These narratives set the stage for the presentation of the data in the next chapter, enabling me to explain participants' experiences within the context of their masculine-dominated workplace.

Table 3.2: Illustration of relationship between themes and research participants

Theme	Sub-theme	Definition	Quotes	Participant
Political Will	Purpose	The desired outcome that motivates an individual to engage in political activity, and the alignment of this purpose with one's values.	"I'm intentionally saying 'yes' to more things to advance my career."	Cathy
	Intention	The reasons for an individual's decision to engage in, or disengage from, political activity, based on perceptions of political actors.	"It's important to be authentic and conscious of why you're doing something."	Diane

3.3 Ethics

Palys (2003) states that any research that involves human participants must include safeguards to treat individuals with dignity and protect their interests. Ethics guidelines for researchers cover elements including deception and the use of controversial data collection methods, avoiding physical and psychological harm, anonymity of participants, confidentiality of the information collected, and informed consent prior to participation in a study (Thorpe and Holt, 2012). Research ethics also safeguards the researcher by protecting the right to publish and disseminate the results of a study (Hendricks, 2013). To maintain ethical practices in the course of this study, participants were provided with two key pieces of communication: participant information sheet and informed consent form, which can be found in Appendices 2 and 3. The participant information sheet included an overview of the study, summarized the scope of each person's participation, described the purpose of the research, and the ways in which the resulting information would be used and distributed. This document was intended to fulfill Glesne's (2006) direction that potential participants must have sufficient information in order to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to participate. If comfortable participating, those interested were asked to sign the informed consent form, indicating their agreement with the terms of this research project, and advising them of the process of revoking consent, should they wish to do so at any time. This consent form was for their participation in both the learning sets, and the interviews that were conducted following the last learning set meeting.

Once the process of data collection began, confidentiality was maintained by storing information in a secured location that was only accessible by me. The same applied to all electronic data, which was password protected and again not accessible to anyone else. Confidentiality of the information shared by learning set participants was further assured through the creation of a set of ground rules (Appendix 4), which were reviewed at the beginning of every meeting and to which everyone agreed. These were established to protect against the possibility of members inadvertently sharing information with others outside of the research project. The anonymity of the learning set participants was similarly protected through the aggregation of the information shared during meetings, and by the inclusion of comments without attribution in the Findings section of this thesis. This commitment to participants' privacy continued beyond the conclusion of the project when the learning set group asked me to share some of the raw data collected with one of their department's managers. I declined this offer, concerned that specific comments might be linked to specific individuals, offering instead to present general themes identified, which would not compromise anyone who had participated in this study. Finally, Glesne

(2006) warns of the potential harm that may be caused once research findings are made public. Given that learning set members participated in this study of their own volition and without formal organizational support, the name of their employer has been withheld from this thesis.

3.4 Subjectivity Statement

Preissle (2008) define subjectivity statements as “a summary of who researchers are in relation to what and whom they are studying” (p. 845). As such, these statements are meant to reflect the researcher’s awareness of their own biases, which have been gained through their personal and professional experiences (Preissle, 2008). The purpose of uncovering and making explicit one’s subjectivity is to both identify how these factors may influence a research study, and to communicate these same factors to others who are assessing the credibility and validity of one’s findings (Preissle, 2008). With these objectives in mind, I extend that I hold beliefs and assumptions that can be summarized as:

1. A strong belief in women’s agency, regardless of the context (structure) that individuals operate within;
2. A bias against both masculine norms and organizational politics in general, due to my own professional experiences as a consultant and leader in various organizations; and
3. A predisposition for action learning as a data collection and change approach, due to my previous history with it.

This first belief was a primary reason that influenced me to pursue research with participants of the selected organization, despite the fact that formal organizational support was withheld. While the scope and findings might have been different with the ability to explore interventions aimed at the organizational system, I believed that it was still possible to secure data that was relevant to the research questions I sought to answer by focusing on those things that were within research participants’ power to enact. Further, it was this belief that prompted me to include the use of systems mapping as part of this study, as I anticipated that actions taken at the individual level would still have impacts at the organizational level.

The second point, that of my bias against masculine norms and organizational politics, was the one I perceived as having the greatest potential in adversely affecting my actions and interpretations of the data collected. This stems from my experiences both as a professional woman, and having worked in masculine industries and organizations. As such, I have experienced the constraints of the “old boys’

network”, and seen the effects that organizational politics can have, both positive and negative. Personally, I found myself with a paradoxical view of political engagement by recognizing its power while eschewing associated actions as distasteful. My fear of unduly affecting this study because of these biases had me checking my participation in action learning sets to ensure that I was not voicing my agreement or disagreement with information being shared as a result of my experiences. It was also this bias that prompted the majority of my reflections and journaling, as I sought to understand and test my assumptions, seeking different perspectives in the literature and from others in my circle of associates and friends. Additionally, I intentionally sought perspectives that contradicted my own when completing my literature review, as I sought to create a complete picture of the topic I was studying. Despite my reflection and attempts at reflexivity, I acknowledge that this bias may still be present in my coding and interpretation of the data collected, and especially in my discussion chapter in which I not only link key findings to the literature, but also offer my personal reflections on those items that were most impactful to me as a scholar-practitioner.

My predisposition for action learning can be seen in my choice of action learning as a data collection method. I have previous experience with action learning sets from my role as a practitioner, and although I had never used it in this fashion before, I felt that my comfort with this approach would make my dual role of researcher and facilitator simpler. Further, I believed this was one of the best ways to enact the full benefits of an action research project, by selecting an approach that both reflected the iterative nature of action research and benefitted participants. This history and beliefs were part of the reason I discarded some other potential approaches.

In summary, I describe myself as a researcher who has a strong belief in women’s agency, and acts upon it herself, conveying confidence that one’s actions can create ripples of change despite a lack of organizational support; a professional who has witnessed and unwittingly maintained cultures of masculinity, in which political engagement has sometimes surpassed the importance knowledge and skills of organizational members; and a practitioner who has experienced and witnessed the power that action learning has for addressing problems and creating positive change. Despite my biases, I believe that this study and the learnings that resulted will prove valuable to other women, organizations and scholar-practitioners, and am comfortable that others who share a similar history will see themselves in the findings described in this thesis.

Chapter Summary

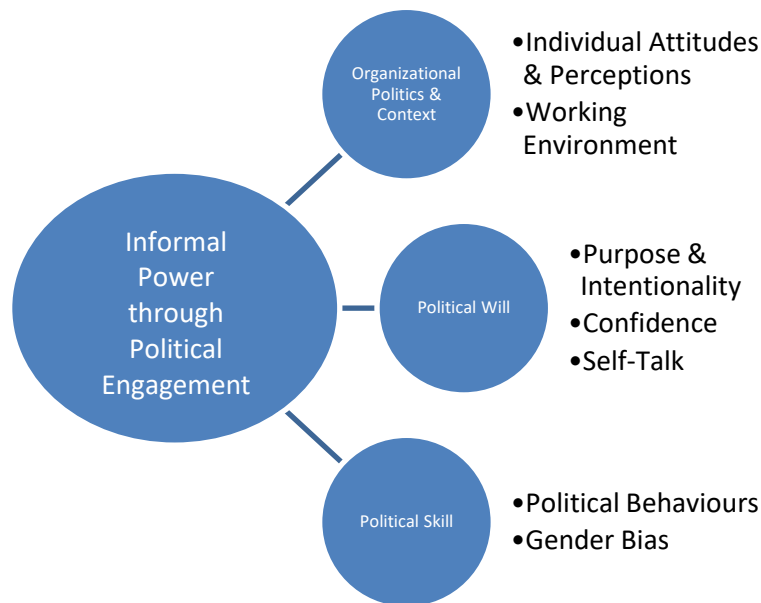
This chapter provided a description of the methodology applied to this research project, beginning with a discussion of the research philosophy underpinning this study, followed by an overview of the design and deployment of the two quantitative data collection methods employed. This overview included information about the sample used for each approach, and a detailed account of the data collection and analysis processes applied. The results of this study will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

The focus of this chapter is to present the results of this research study and discuss the implications of the data collected. The previous Methodology chapter describes the data collection process in a structured, linear fashion, and the first part of this chapter follows in a similar fashion, starting with a description of the action learning meetings that occurred, since they represent the most significant focus of this study. Following those, the chapter shifts from a description of events as they occurred and continues thematically, presenting short narratives of the learning set participants' experiences. The women's definition of organizational politics is also discussed, as is the working environment within which this research was undertaken. This latter item provides context for the women's choices, and a deeper understanding of how their actions affected both their personal and professional goals, as well as the impacts on their workplace.

A coding framework emerged from the analysis of the data collected from the learning sets and individual interviews that reflected three key themes: political skill, political will, and individual and organizational attitudes, which resulted due to the nature of organizational politics and the working environment of the learning set members. However, when describing the experiences of participants in this chapter, the interdependencies between the three areas became clear and made it challenging to discuss the areas independently of one another. As a result, the information presented sometimes appears in more than one section to reflect the interplay between these three aspects of organizational politics. The categories that provide a loose framework for this data is as follows (Figure 4.1):

Figure 4.1: Framework for organization of data collected



Of the six participants, three shared a similar journey and produced similar outcomes, stating ultimately that they experienced no change in their level of informal power because they lacked a compelling reason to engage in organizational politics. The other three women engaged fully in the goal of seeking greater informal power through political engagement. This difference in experiences can be attributed to differences in political will on the part of those participating and is aligned with research on this topic that states that political will is a precursor to political skill.

The political will, or motivation of the participants in this study, can be described as follows:

- Desire for career progression: Cathy
- Desire to influence senior leaders, all of whom are men: Julie
- Desire to position her team as a centre of expertise and knowledge to other departments: Betty
- No desire to pursue greater informal power (or organizational politics): Jackie, Susan, Diane

An overview of the findings from these women's experiences have been summarized in Table 4.1. While the actions, results, and learnings described there are offered in a linear fashion, the process, in actuality, was much messier, with participants sometimes being inactive for a cycle, or reflecting and gaining insights from others' actions instead of their own.

During the six months spent with participants, six iterative cycles of action and reflection were completed. Additionally, one further cycle was completed at the end of the study when participants identified a last action they wished to take and offered their reflections and learnings in the context of the individual interview. Although the women shared a common purpose as their reason for participating in this study, that of improving their engagement in organizational politics, it is important to highlight that each person identified the action or change intervention they would pursue, which sometimes varied from actions that others had determined to try. This action component was a critical part of this study from the perspective of attempting to create change, which Zuber-Skerritt (2018) state is a key objective of any action research project. To understand how these iterative cycles of planning, action and reflection occurred, the next section offers a narrative describing the six learning set meetings.

Table 4.1: Summary of Findings from Research Participants' Experiences

Participant	Individual Purpose / Motivation	Key Actions Taken	Results Produced	Learnings
Cathy	Career advancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Took on work outside of areas of expertise/comfort • Changed language to convey greater confidence • Was more decisive and speaking up more rather than only contributing when feeling prepared 	By offering her perspectives when asked, able to point out information that has been missed. This has led to greater interaction with senior leaders, increased attendance at leadership meetings, and placed her into the role of coach to these managers.	There is value in being more confident and decisive, and behaving in this fashion gains attention and trust from senior leaders, and allows you to build your experience. While this is what gets you noticed, you also need to possess the knowledge to be able to deliver results.
Julie	Influence senior leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was more direct when communicating with managers and director, and more persistent in having her opinions heard by others • Assessed situations against personal values when deciding whether to act 	Positive reaction from her own manager has reinforced her conviction to speak up on issues that others shy away from. She continues to feel frustrated that she is not being "heard" by some leaders, despite being given the opportunity to voice her opinions.	Due to the energy needed to act politically, it is important to critically assess which opportunities to take advantage of. Highlighting information that others find uncomfortable may cause conflicting results, with some people appreciating your boldness while others avoid you. It is important to try to understand your impact on others when behaving this way.
Betty	Increase credibility of her team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surrounded self with like-minded individuals to support her position and views • Changed language to convey greater confidence and expertise • Started asking her manager for help more frequently 	Has received good feedback on proposals that she developed and presented to leaders, indicating how her team can/cannot assist other groups. Feels that she is now more respected and her contributions are more valued by others.	Women are not considered overly aggressive, so the language used can diminish an already weaker position. Hearing what the other set members tried, and the results they produced, has made her more self-aware of what she needs from her manager to be successful, and to be willing to ask for it.

Participant	Individual Purpose / Motivation	Key Actions Taken	Results Produced	Learnings
Jackie	Focus on learning the job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intentionally networking to expand professional relationships • Changed language to convey greater confidence 	Could not articulate a compelling enough reason to network and abandoned this strategy after one failed attempt. Acknowledged that certain phrases could undermine her credibility, but decided not to remove them from her discourse for fear that she would be considered a “know-it-all”.	Without a meaningful outcome for networking, the experience felt artificial and awkward. She perceives herself as having little of value to add to discussions and errs on the side of caution by staying silent. She acknowledges that she may have missed opportunities to build her reputation, or that her silence has harmed her reputation.
Diane	Transitioning to retirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stopped apologizing for professional weaknesses and doubting self in areas of strength • Attempted to change language to convey greater confidence 	Redefined her definition of success and discovered that it was different from others’ definitions. This has allowed her to have more productive work conversations with others where the focus is on future actions versus assigning blame for tasks that weren’t completed.	Was more political earlier in her career when she was interested in advancement; this makes her believe that she is capable of acting politically, when needed. Has become more comfortable with her discomfort in trying new behaviours and setting boundaries with others. She no longer believes you have to “be nasty in order to be successful.”
Susan	Current situation better than acting politically	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stood firm on decisions that reflect her areas of expertise • Sought opportunities to challenge the status quo 	Realized that she has a choice about engaging in organizational politics, and that she can still do good work without behaving politically; this has led to being more intentional about deciding whether or not to engage. Also, she missed opportunities to challenge, recognizing them in hindsight, but was unable to recognize them in the moment when there was an opportunity to act.	She is intimidated by those in senior roles, and it is these feelings that prevent her from being more assertive in her dealings with them. Before this study, she knew that something wasn’t working for her, but was unable to articulate what it was. She now possesses the awareness to identify political activity and make a choice about whether or not to participate.

4.1 Action Learning Sets

4.1.1 Meeting One

The first learning set meeting was lengthier than the ones that followed, since it was necessary to reconfirm the objective of the meetings, and introduce participants to the structure that would guide our conversations. At the start of this meeting, learning set members introduced themselves and it was at this time that I learned that five of the six women represented an intact work team, while the sixth member worked closely with the others on various work projects. Additionally, the women explained their reasons for wanting to participate in this study. I introduced myself as well and reiterated the information that had been provided in writing about the study, reaffirming the fact that the women also had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, should they decide to do so. I gave everyone a journal and asked them to capture reflections about their actions throughout the study so that they would be prepared to share that information with the group at each meeting. Next, I explained my role in the learning sets, highlighting my shift away from 'expert' because of my role as a consultant, to the role of researcher and facilitator in our conversations. I also reminded the group that I would be taking notes of our conversations, and informed them that these would be made without the use of any identifying information.

Next, I provided the group with a list of generic action learning ground rules, explaining that confidentiality and the ability to respectfully challenge one another were fundamental principles to both my research project and to any action research study. I went on to explain that the ability to create change through action learning sets was often linked, not just to the ability of individuals to take action, but also to the ability of those participating to challenge existing mental models and for new understandings to emerge. The group offered some minor wording changes and additions to the ground rules, which were then captured on flipchart paper and displayed and reviewed at every subsequent meeting. Once the ground rules had been established, our conversation turned to organization politics. I offered my definition of organizational politics, and was surprised to have my view challenged almost immediately. While my definition dealt with the influence tactics employed by individuals in the attainment of goals, participants offered an expanded definition that also included the 'hidden' or 'unspoken' rules that exist in working environments, which often reflect the norms or culture of an organization. Further, we also agreed that the power from political engagement is unsanctioned, meaning that it does not come from any position of formal authority.

With a common definition of organizational politics, I shifted my attention to providing a common language for our meetings, as well as clarifying our understanding of the system within which the women were operating. This was enabled by a set of ten positive and negative archetypes, discussed in greater detail in the next section in Table 4.7. This resulted in the development of two systems maps, which provided the group with a clearer understanding of their environment, and led to the focus of the discussion for this first meeting, once it became apparent that a great deal of informal power seemed to be resting in the hands of a small number of people within the department. This spurred a conversation about the behaviours demonstrated by those individuals in order to garner greater influence and ended with a discussion about the women's discomfort with the pursuit of power. The learning set meeting ended with the women identifying the actions that they would engage in to affect their situation, after which I explained the format for the next meeting and committed to provide an electronic copy of the systems maps to everyone for their reference. In this instance, everyone's actions focused on networking, reflecting a strong belief that political engagement revolved primarily around one's ability to leverage connections with influential individuals.

4.1.2 Meeting Two

Following a review of the ground rules, the women took turns explaining the actions they'd taken to engage politically in order to increase the level of informal power. Four of the six women had taken advantage of opportunities to network, and had all targeted individuals in senior leadership roles within the department. In this case, the women had defined networking as the intentional creation, deepening, and leveraging of relationships with influential individuals as a means of securing greater informal power. All but one of the four expressed extreme discomfort with the actions taken, which led to a discussion of beliefs regarding the nature of relationships. Of those who expressed discomfort with the act of networking, one (Jackie) stated that she would not pursue the activity again. When pressed on this decision, because the learning set reminded her that she had been a talented networker in a past role, she came to the realization that she needed a compelling purpose to do so. This led to a discussion about the motivation needed to act politically, and was cited by one of the others (Diane) as her reason for inaction. The group then returned to a discussion of power, agreeing with the literature that suggests that women are less likely to behave politically in the pursuit of power and may be motivated to be political actors for other reasons.

Betty and Cathy had both attempted to network, with the former attempting to gain greater visibility for the work of her team, and Cathy wanting to increase her professional credibility with senior leaders. While they agreed with the other women's views regarding the nature of relationships and the need for a compelling purpose, both also described their efforts as being successful in furthering their goals. Julie had similar success, although she also expressed the least reticence in building relationships with individuals of influence, citing a belief that she should do everything within her power to be effective in her role. The result of this discussion prompted us to somewhat redefine the problem being addressed, shifting away from the assumption that women might not be skilled political actors, to the possibility that women might simply lack the will to act politically. This theme prompted me to return to the literature and further explore the concepts of political will and skill, as well as the motivations of men and women with respect to power. At the conclusion of this meeting, Betty, Cathy and Julie stated their intention to extend their efforts to garner support from influential individuals, while Diane and Jackie sought to identify their motivation for being political, and Susan indicated that she would continue to seek opportunities to relationship-build.

4.1.3 Meeting Three

During the time in between meetings two and three, four of the women had continued to try and leverage their contacts in pursuit of their professional goals. As they described their efforts, it became clear, however, that how they were leveraging relationships differed and produced different results. Julie shared that she had paired her willingness to influence a senior leader with more direct language, producing mixed results. While she believed that there was value in her bold approach, since she had managed to get the leader's attention, she also highlighted that the leader was surprised this behaviour, which may have detracted from her message. She stated her belief that this may have not been fully related to the fact that she behaved differently, but also that she was demonstrating a level of assertiveness more frequently associated with men. Susan also took action to improve her situation, specifically targeting her need to be more assertive in her areas of expertise. Her experience revealed that hierarchy played a significant role in her desire and ability to 'stand firm', with interactions involving senior individuals being especially difficult, unless a strong relationship already existed with those individuals.

Betty continued to leverage relationships to support her team's efforts, and described several instances where she had intentionally used verbal and non-verbal cues to secure agreement or other forms of

support for her recommendations and work. Despite her success, she continued to be concerned about 'using' others, which was a sentiment that was both agreed to and challenged by the learning set. To offer insights from an academic perspective, I introduced information found from my literature review that dealt with gender bias, regarding the expectation of how men and women should behave, and how men and women perceive relationships differently. Additionally, following this meeting I reviewed more of the literature surrounding women's confidence and assertiveness, as these themes emerged in the reflections and learning shared. These latter themes focused the change interventions that stemmed from this meeting, with actions largely focusing on the issues of negative self-talk, confidence, and the underlying assumptions underpinning both.

4.1.4 Meeting Four

The beginning of this meeting extended the earlier discussion about gender bias and the behaviours associated with political skill. This was prompted by experiences shared by three of the learning set members, in which the women shared how the effectiveness of their actions during the past month had been diluted because they had acted in ways not consistent with their gender. It was highlighted that due to this reaction, along with the fact that they continued to struggle with the perception of their skills and expertise, that it was sometimes challenging to contribute in meaningful ways during workplace interactions. The discussion turned to the topic of the women's credibility, and the link between appearing knowledgeable by speaking up. The group specifically explored associated behaviours that contributed to political actors' perceptions of expertise, and the mental models that prevented them from being more active participants in discussions, especially those in which they possessed knowledge.

This meeting produced another insight into the challenge of women engaging in organizational politics, specifically regarding the desire to engage with others collaboratively rather than competitively. In the learning set's experience, the former characteristic supported other key principles, such as the development of genuine, mutually-beneficial relationships, and allowing others to speak or behaving in a more modest fashion during interactions, contributed to more collaborative interactions. This idea was challenged during this conversation, leading some of the women to commit to being more assertive in their communication over the coming month. Being more assertive was defined as both contributing ideas and information more frequently, as well as speaking up more quickly and decisively than they had in the past.

4.1.5 Meeting Five

While there had been evidence in past meetings that the interventions being employed were having small, positive impacts, this was the first meeting when some of the larger effects began to emerge. Julie shared her experience in silencing her negative self-talk, which allowed her to address a business situation that she might have otherwise remained silent about. This experience improved her level of confidence, in part because it produced a positive result on the business. Betty described how her continued efforts to lobby for support from influential individuals had improved her team's standing, allowing them greater control over the work they accepted and earning greater support for their recommendations to departmental leaders. This success also produced the secondary positive consequence of bolstering her confidence.

Additionally, this meeting contributed to another significant learning, which identified the women's word choice as a potential barrier to their objectives of gaining greater influence. Cathy identified several common words and phrases that she believed undermined her credibility. Specifically, she explained her observations that men appeared to choose words that reflected a different level of confidence and certainty, which was absent in her discourse. The other members of the learning set agreed with her assertion, and explored the underlying reasons for their word choice, noting that they chose words that were 'less threatening' and more modest intentionally. This discussion shaped the change intervention that was pursued following this meeting, with the learning set focusing on removing certain words and phrases from their discourse, and using language that conveyed a greater sense of confidence. This triggered me to review additional literature about the link between organizational politics and confidence, as well as the nature of organizational discourse.

4.1.6 Meeting Six

For the first time since the inception of this learning set, everyone had attempted the change intervention discussed the previous month. They identified specific words and phrases and replaced or eliminated them from their discourse, pointing to common language such as "I think" and "just", which they believed undermined their messages. Everyone reported positive results, with the women highlighting outcomes that included achieving a "stronger leadership presence", and a greater acceptance of presented ideas and recommendations. The conversation turned to the concept of decisiveness when Cathy related that her shift in language had increased her professional reputation, which in turn had led to more opportunities where she could share her expertise. This highlighted a new

challenge regarding decision-making, and more specifically, taking action quickly and decisively. The group explored some of the reasons they found quick decision-making difficult, which linked back to earlier discussions about negative self-talk, low levels of confidence, and fears about their intentions being misinterpreted and labelled as self-serving. The group's next set of actions stemmed from this conversation, with the learning set members identifying the need to make a difference and acting in congruence with their nature as ways to increase their political engagement.

4.1.7 Meeting Seven

This was the last meeting of the learning set, and as such, the purpose was to share the results of the women's last change interventions and to review the systems maps that were created earlier. As with prior meetings, the women described their experiences with their identified actions, relating the results and learnings that had been produced. Key among the information that was shared were the themes of purpose and action aligned with values as supports to political activity. Additionally, Julie explained how her continued use of different language was positively affecting her impact and confidence, while Cathy described her increased level of professional visibility, which had resulted from her intentional decision to act more decisively.

Once the discussion of the previous month's actions had been completed, I presented the group with the two systems maps that had been created during our first meeting. We reviewed each of the archetypes and the associated examples, and the women identified areas in which positive archetypes had appeared or had begun to replace their negative counterparts. These changes will be discussed in the next section of this chapter, and a summary can be viewed in Table 4.7. The learning sets concluded with final remarks about the experience offered by everyone, and with a commitment to reconvene as a group to review the initial findings once the learning set data had been themed.

In summary, the cycles of action engaged in can be described as follows (Table 4.2):

Table 4.2: Overview of Cycles of Action

Cycle	Action / Change Intervention	Reflections	Learnings
1	Creating a common definition of organizational politics and a systems map	Men's and women's behaviours perceived differently	Discomfort with the idea of pursuing power
2	Networking to gain influence	Discomfort associated with the act of networking	Purpose is key to building influential relationships with others
3	Intentionally seeking the support of others	Beliefs underpinning the nature of relationships, and the value of reciprocity and authenticity	It is acceptable to leverage relationships to accomplish team and organizational goals
4	Communicating assertively	May remain silent or wait to speak because of perceived low value of contributions	Assertive and swift communication is associated with knowledge and skill
5	Changing language being used	Women sometimes use language that undermines their message to avoid perceptions of arrogance	Credibility increases through use of more assertive language
6	Acting decisively	Discomfort associated with quick decision-making	Credibility can be gained through decisive action, and confidence is gained by experiencing success

4.1.8 Action Learning Set Reflections

In addition to the focus on iterative cycles of planning, taking action, and reflection, attention was also given to the process of conducting action learning. This was accomplished in two ways:

1. Asking learning set members for their thoughts about the process at the end of every meeting to identify changes for future meetings; and
2. Asking learning set members about the experience of participating in action learning during the individual interviews.

While the former strategy did not produce any adjustments, learning set members highlighted both positives and negatives about the action learning process at the conclusion of these meetings, including some suggestions for future improvements. An overview of their comments is provided below in Table 4.3. While this table highlights a greater number of positive aspects, it is important to note that all of the negative items are linked to the diversity of the action learning set and were mentioned by 3 of the 6 women.

Table 4.3: Commentary on Action Learning Process

Positive Aspects / Valued	Negative Aspects / Items to Change
Ability to reflect and take action on a work-related problem with the support and collaboration of the group.	That 5 of 6 learning set members represented an intact work team, which may have occasionally produced 'groupthink', and sometimes caused members to censor themselves with respect to the information shared during meetings.
Discussing organizational politics to deepen our understanding of it and the associated behaviours.	Desired greater diversity in the membership of the learning set to access a more diverse set of perspectives.
Opportunity to share experiences with others and discussing strategies that did and did not work.	
The accountability to learning set members for taking action.	
Addition of information from the literature as shared by the facilitator.	
Openness and honesty demonstrated by learning set members during discussions.	
Ability to take action during the time between action learning meetings.	
Learning from others' actions.	
Different perspectives that shifted understanding and meaning of both organizational politics and the organization's culture.	
The structure provided by the process.	

As the researcher and facilitator of the action learning meetings, my reflections and observations are similar to those items shown in Table 4.3. On the positive side, I valued the:

- Structure of the action learning process;
- Opportunity to inform action planning with information from the literature; and
- Differing perspectives that highlighted and tested assumptions, that often led to different ideas to create change.

On the negative side, I experienced the same concerns about 'groupthink', the lack of diverse perspectives, and censorship of information. Additionally, I disagreed with some of the items that were highlighted by members of the learning set as positives, specifically that the process created accountability for everyone to take action, since this was not the case as can be seen in the descriptions

of the learning set meetings offered in sections 4.1.1 to 4.1.7. I also disagreed somewhat with the statement regarding the openness and honesty of members, since I was aware of instances where individuals had intentionally withheld information from the group, for a variety of reasons. This item lends further support to the learning set comment about censorship due to the pre-existing relationships between members.

Summary: Action Learning Sets

This section has described the iterative cycles of action that occurred during the action learning sets, which were of primary focus during this research project. It also offers an overview of the limitations and strengths of the action learning process.

The remainder of this chapter provides more detailed descriptions of the actions taken and the results produced by the participants in this study. Again, it is important to note that the sections that follow are not organized linearly based on the timeline of the learning set meetings or individual interviews, but by the three overarching themes identified:

1. Organizational politics and context – describing the influences of the nature of organizational politics and the workplace culture that learning set members operate within;
2. Political will – describing factors that impacted the motivation of learning set members to adopt political behaviours; and
3. Political skill – describing the specific behaviours that represented political activity for the learning set members.

4.2 Organizational Politics & Context

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the actions taken by the members of the learning set were influenced by both their individual attitudes about organizational politics, as well as the organizational norms present within their workplace, making it impossible to isolate political will and skill from organizational politics and context. As such, this section offers an overview of the perceptions present, along with other factors that emerged as influencers of the action learning set's perspectives and actions.

4.2.1 Perceptions of Organizational Politics

Although each of the learning set participants had reviewed the study information sheet, which discussed engagement in organizational politics as behaviours through which individuals can access informal power, it became immediately clear during our first discussion that a common definition did not yet exist within the group. Various perspectives were offered, which led to a definition that encompassed the following items:

- Influencing others to accomplish personal and professional goals;
- Applying power that is not sanctioned (due to positional or formal authority); and
- Hidden rules that are embedded within the organization's norms and culture.

Many of the views offered regarding organizational politics were negative, and the women cited behaviours or actions that they deemed unethical because they appeared not to be in opposition to the interests of the department or others. This led to comments such as "Nice people don't do that" when referring to political activity, and the conclusion that acting politically was distasteful. Susan summarized the group's feelings about political activity by stating:

"...there's a lot of posturing that goes on for people to move up in the organization and it clouds the work getting done. Rather than the goal being whatever the business outcome is, it is overridden by people's political agendas. Political agenda meaning either self-serving or something within their own work, rather than the greater good."

4.2.2 Organizational Context

When the discussion turned to organizational politics within the women's workplace, participants highlighted a culture which values certain titles and roles, such as professional engineers, many of which have been traditionally male-dominated positions and continue to be held mostly by men within this organization. They shared concerns regarding the composition of the senior leadership team, stating that there was a need for more women in those roles, and that the positions of Director and higher are currently all occupied by men.

"[We need] a change in management positions from only men to also include women. We need more role models in senior positions [Director and above]."

Further, they stated a belief that women have to both promote and prove themselves more than men when in leadership positions.

"Men are recognized for performing, taking action; women have to self-sell. I have to prove more in that position."

"I feel that we have to operate at a higher level to be seen by others as adequate."

The question of skill did not arise with respect to women's participation in politics, with the learning set instead stating that political behaviours required a significant outlay of energy, which made it difficult for them to engage.

"It's exhausting to navigate organizational politics because it's not a natural way of being. [I'm] not a marathon runner, but feel like I'm running a marathon every day."

In describing the organization's political climate, the women were critical of the hierarchical structure that made it difficult to change things and pointed to those individuals who they viewed as being active political actors as being those that had the greatest influence, but not necessarily the greatest expertise in moving the organization forward. For example, Betty stated her belief that the organization needs to be "more transparent and collaborative", referring to the lack of access to decision-makers, and the inability to influence organizational plans and strategies. Cathy suggested that the organization values

individuals who are “bold, and share their opinions, and appear decisive [...] regardless of if they know things”. Susan offered a similarly critical view of their workplace, describing it as:

“Very political. I think there’s a lot of posturing that goes on for people to move up in the organization and it clouds the work being done. Rather than the goal being whatever the business outcome is, it is overridden by people’s political agendas. Political agenda meaning either self-serving or something within their own work, rather than the greater good.”

Julie offered a somewhat more balanced view of the political climate within her workplace, describing it as being in a state of change, comprised of both positive and negative aspects:

“I feel that our political climate is in an evolution. I think there is a climate of judgement, and blame, and fear, and risk-aversion that is very deeply-rooted and probably decades old. There is also a political climate where it’s about innovation and taking risks and learning and growth – everything opposite to the blame and judgement.”

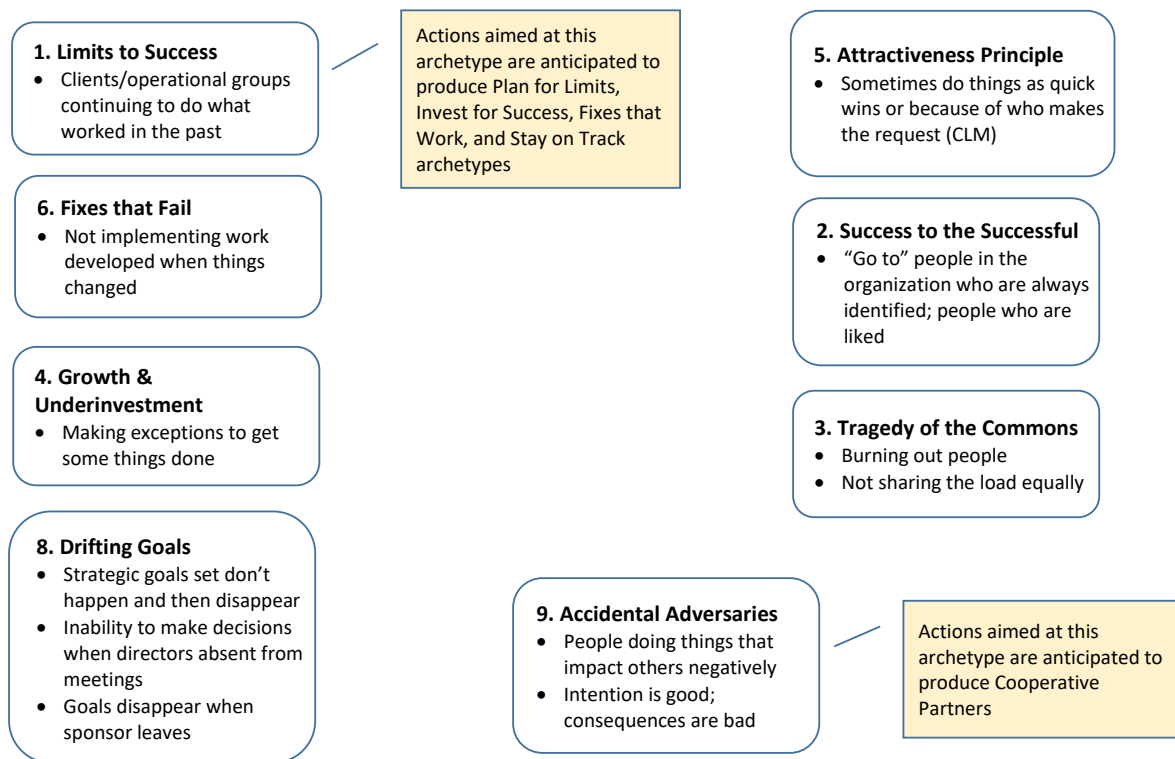
With the goal of establishing a common understanding of the women’s workplace environment, the learning set was introduced to an expanded set of systems thinking archetypes, representing ten positive and ten negative characteristics (Table 4.4), as developed by Herasymowich and Senko (2002).

The group agreed upon the archetypes present within their part of the organization and supported their assertions with specific examples of behaviours and actions they had witnessed or had knowledge of. Once the archetypes present had been identified, the learning set created two systems maps that described how the archetypes related to one another and impacted each other (Figures 4.2 and 4.3).

Table 4.4: Systems Thinking Archetypes

Negative Archetypes	Positive Archetypes
Limits to Success <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operating within constraints and pressures; greater effort produces fewer results 	Plan for Limits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constraint planning occurs before pressures appear
Success to the Successful <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An individual/group is succeeding at others' expense 	Strut Your Stuff <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify talents and strengths while unnoticed; operate in win/win fashion
Tragedy of the Commons <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overuse of a common resource 	Collective Agreement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreement or regulation of resources
Growth & Underinvestment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quick fixes to pressures; no investment in future potential 	Invest for Success <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear focus on what defines success; investment in new ideas and increased capacity
Attractiveness Principle <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attempting, and failing, to please everyone 	Be Your Best <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Setting realistic boundaries about what's possible
Fixes that Fail <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short-term solutions that often produce negative side effects 	Fixes that Work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Long-term solutions that consider interrelationships and potential side effects
Shifting the Burden <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shifting responsibility, and placing blame, on others 	Bite the Bullet <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accountability and commitment to long-term solutions
Drifting Goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lowered standards or heroic efforts to deal with too much work 	Stay on Track <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commitment to measures of quality and success
Accidental Adversaries <ul style="list-style-type: none"> One party accidentally alienates another, but the accidental action is perceived as intentional 	Cooperative Partners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parties discuss their actions and intentions, and create strong working relationships
Escalation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extreme case of accidental adversaries where parties retaliate and actions escalate 	Win/Win <ul style="list-style-type: none"> One or more parties end retaliatory actions, and parties begin working together

Figure 4.2: Systems Map, Initial State – Negative Archetypes



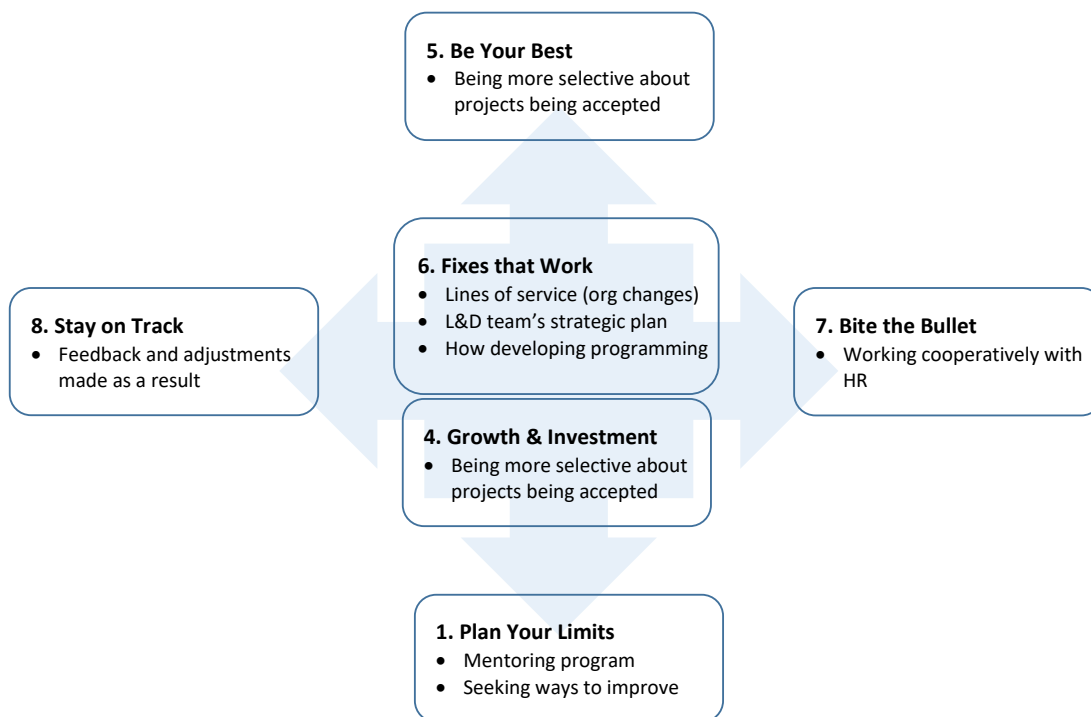
When completed, the systems maps produced were used to create the workplace narrative of the women participating in this study. The negative archetypes map described an environment with the following key characteristics:

- Work is done based on the political capital or authority possessed by those asking, meaning that those with the greatest power, (informal and formal), have their priorities addressed at the expense of other work.
- There is little appetite to change processes and procedures, with most individuals relying upon strategies that have been successful in the past.
- A small sub-set of the department is continually drawn upon and provided with resources to complete work. These individuals are perceived as the “favorites” and have demonstrated both strong political acumen and a high degree of action orientation.

The positive archetypes map highlighted the following key features of the women's workplace:

- Select groups within the department were beginning to experience success along with additional resources by being more selective about the work they agreed to undertake.
- While actions within the overall department were not always in alignment with organizational priorities, there was some ability within individual teams to be more strategic and collaborative across the department.

Figure 4.3: Systems Map, Initial State – Positive Archetypes



It had been my intention to continue using the systems maps throughout this study, to help learning set participants test potential actions before moving to implementation. The learning set, however, expressed little interest in using the maps in this manner, equating the lack of organizational support for this research project with an inability to affect change at the organizational level. As such, organizational change was expected as positive consequence of this study but was not the primary focus. For these reasons, the systems maps were not used to inform the individual actions taken each month by anticipating the potential outcomes that might be produced. Instead, the maps were revisited following the last learning set meeting to identify changes that had unexpectedly occurred as a result of the set's activities, thereby deepening the group's learning and insights. The changes that were identified at the end of this study are summarized in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5: Summary of archetype changes observed by learning set participants

Archetypes	Change
Growth and Underinvestment	While this archetype was still present, participants noted that they were accomplishing work despite having few resources to do so.
Success to the Successful	This archetype was described as “spinning” meaning that while the negative characteristics of this archetype were still present in the system, participants were also seeing evidence of the positive archetype, Strut Your Stuff, appearing at times. This was evidenced by the fact that the team that most of the group belonged to were becoming the “go to” people.
Attractiveness Principle	Participants suggested that this negative archetype had shifted to its positive counterpart, Be Our Best, citing their ability to decline certain types of work and reduce the overall amount being accepted.
Tragedy of the Commons	This negative archetype was identified as still being present, with both negative and positive behaviours appearing within the system. On the negative side, participants identified an accelerated rate of burn-out for some individuals; on the positive side, they stated that some work was being spread over a larger group of people, thereby removing the burden previously borne by some.
Fixes that Fail and Limits to Success	Participants agreed that neither of these negative archetypes were present within their system, stating that they now saw the positive versions of each: Fixes that Work and Planning for Success.

4.3.1 Agency vs Structure

A large portion of this chapter, as well as the information already presented, focuses on women’s agency in organizational politics; that is, how women can better engage in political activities to increase their informal power. While this was the primary focus on this study, data was also collected about ways in which the organization could assist study participants with their goal of engaging more easily in organizational politics, with the hope that some of the organizational structures present might be changed. The learning set identified four changes that would better support women as political actors (Table 4.6).

Table 4.6: Summary of organizational changes to support women's political engagement

Change	Description of Change
Structured Networking	Structured, formalized ways of connecting people across the department that would remove some of the discomfort associated with this activity, and allow individuals who might not normally meet to connect and explore potential areas of interest and opportunity.
Updated Succession Planning Process	Adopt updated succession planning strategies that are transparent regarding the position criteria and selection process, and challenge the traditional list of qualifications associated with roles to confirm they are all still necessary to complete the associated work tasks.
Normalize Political Activity	Increase the focus on political acumen, teaching employees that political activity is acceptable and explaining how to engage in it in positive ways.
Address Disparity	Create an open dialogue about the inequalities present across all areas of diversity, including gender, and address organizational policies that may be inadvertently supporting continued disparity.

Summary: Organizational Politics and Context

The women participating in the learning set expressed an overall negative perception of organizational politics, many of the associated behaviours, and the masculine-dominated nature of their workplace which posed challenges when attempting to get things done. Despite that, the group acknowledged that organizational politics was an effective way of accomplishing work, and was necessary at times, especially when aspiring to or holding more senior positions in the department. While the learning set participants were cognizant of the environment they operated within, and acknowledged that effectiveness was linked to behaviours that aligned with organizational norms, they also identified ways in which their employer could help them be more successful in navigating the political landscape.

4.3 Political Will

One of the first themes to emerge from learning set discussions was that of a general or overall discomfort with the idea of engagement in organizational politics. During the course of this study, participants offered various reasons for their discomfort with political behaviour, which fell into three categories: purpose and intentionality, a lack of confidence, and negative self-talk. While negative self-talk was cited as a contributing factor to a lack of confidence, the women who expressed a clear purpose for wanting to improve their ability to engage in organizational politics were able to overcome their lack of confidence, resulting in an increased demonstration of political behaviours.

4.3.1 Purpose and Intentionality

At the start of this study, all of the women stated their desire to gain greater informal power through the application of political behaviours, but as the monthly learning set meetings continued, it became apparent that different levels of motivation existed. For Jackie, Diane, and Susan, reasons for not pursuing greater power included:

- a need to focus on learning the job versus building relationships and influence with individuals outside of her immediate team;
- a focus on her coming retirement years and the desire to identify what the next stage of her life would involve; and
- an acceptance that her current situation and level of power were more appealing than the discomfort associated with increased political activity.

As a result, these three women reported little or no motivation to improve their political skill by the end of the study. This lack of political will was further expressed in comments such as:

“If there aren’t any payoffs to acting politically, then I’m reluctant to do it again.”

“If I can’t be recognized for my credibility and my work, then I’m not interested in playing the game.”

“(Women) become tired and we choose not to fight.”

“[I] think I navigated the political system better when I was younger because I saw things differently and wanted to climb the corporate ladder. My purpose and intent now are different. I can do it if I choose to, but not if I don’t believe in what I’m doing.”

The other women in the study echoed their peers’ comments that political behaviour was uncomfortable and could require significant amounts of their energy. However, they also expressed specific objectives that they wanted to achieve, as presented earlier, which seemed to be sufficient to overcome their discomfort with political activity. Their comments also seemed more positive in nature:

“I did something uncomfortable that produced benefits for the organization.”

“I made a difference, so it was worth the effort to speak up.”

“I’m intentionally saying ‘yes’ to more things to advance my career.”

Another factor that influenced participants’ willingness to engage in organizational politics was concern about the way that political behaviours would be perceived by others. Specifically, the group expressed a belief that their behaviours would be viewed as self-serving or selfish and reflect intentions that weren’t representative of others’ interests. Further, they stated their approval of political activities that were altruistic in nature, and disapproval for those that were for an individual’s personal gain, stating that they were only willing to engage in political activity if their behaviours aligned with their values.

“It’s easier to advocate for others than for myself.”

“We value our reputations.”

“It’s important to be authentic and conscious of why you’re doing something.”

“Women may care more about their impact on others, whereas men aren’t second-guessing themselves about what they do or say and if the impact on others is negative or positive; the outcome is more important than how they get there. Women feel the need to check in with others rather than just being focused on tasks and results.”

Cathy was the only women to pursue a goal that didn’t benefit others, and she revealed during her interview that she was uncomfortable sharing with her fellow learning set participants that her objective was to advance in her career. When asked about the reasons for her reticence in disclosing this information, she stated that she felt she would be looked upon poorly since her reason for behaving politically was self-serving. While Betty’s motives for demonstrating political activity were to benefit her team and department, she also identified that her negative perception of organizational politics was a barrier to her willingness to engage in the behaviours. She described organizational politics as being manipulative and self-serving at the start of the study and indicated that by the end of the study her

perception had changed also include descriptors such as relationship building, collaborative and influence. It was this understanding that positively affected her political will and allowed her to more frequently behave politically.

“I understood organizational politics as being manipulative, self-serving – negative terms. Through our discussions, my understanding changed to behaviours that might be feminine terms such as relationship building, collaborative, influence, etc. My ability changed a little through this process, but my willingness changed a lot on having a different perspective on organizational politics as not being all bad.”

4.3.2 Lack of Confidence

Early on, it became apparent that confidence was another critical issue that impacted the group’s willingness to act politically. While the learning set participants stated that they possessed low level of confidence in engaging in political behaviours, they also offered the perspective that men did not seem to suffer from the same issue.

“(Men) have a ridiculous amount of confidence and really believe they’re right.”

"Tend not to be as loud or as confident."

"Men overestimate their abilities to be competent in the workplace which women underestimate. Therefore, we limit ourselves due to our own actions."

This lack of confidence was seen as the reason for not fully contributing in workplace discussions, for not challenging the statements or recommendations put forward by men, and for giving way in the face of their more confident and assertive male peers. This behaviour even extended to matters which were identified as within their areas of expertise.

"I perceive myself as not having anything of value to add, which leads me to stay silent."

"I don't want to be perceived as that person who's talking without adding value."

“It’s hard to find the confidence to contribute in meetings and express my thoughts and opinions. I need to overcome my thinking of – why would people care about what I have to say?”

To combat this concern, Cathy adopted a strategy of ‘saying yes’, especially to tasks that she might have normally declined due to her perceived lack of knowledge in particular areas. She diligently put this plan into practice partway through our learning set meetings, and reported several positive results. First, she stated that it had been a useful strategy in furthering her goal of career progression, indicating that she was involved in a great deal more than she was previously within her department, and that her scope of informal power and influence had been extended beyond what it initially had been. Second, she indicated that she was interacting with higher levels of management, increasing both her visibility and her credibility within the organization. Third, Cathy explained that not only had her level of experience increased, but with it, her confidence had soared. She shared with the group her realization that by succeeding in new areas, she was proving to herself that she was capable and had begun to place greater trust in her own abilities. This, in turn, allowed her to continue expanding her scope, which she hoped would allow her to eventually create a new role for herself. During Cathy’s interview, she revealed that she had begun to take on new responsibilities, specifically the coaching of some senior leaders, which reflected the role she had hoped to develop. In sharing this outcome, she indicated that she viewed this as, “beneficial to both the organization and self.”

“I tried things and saw that it resulted in people listening to what I was saying, plus formally putting me into a position where I had more influence. Although my position didn’t change, my duties did. I get more work as a result and am almost doing two jobs, doing coaching and onboarding of new managers, which are things I love to do. [...] When they [leaders] asked for my opinion, I pointed out things they’d missed, which resulted in being their personal coach.”

Betty chose to identify supporters of her ideas and her work, and to use non-verbal communication as a way of seeking their agreement during meetings with others. Specifically, she would make eye contact with those individuals who she had identified as being supportive of what she was saying. Betty would hold eye contact with each supporter until they nodded, offering their implied agreement in front of the other attendees. She stated her belief that this tactic provided her with greater credibility in meetings, and that her strategy had proved to be successful in gaining greater informal power in those

discussions. Despite her success, Betty reported that she felt as though she had used the people she had identified as supporters. When questioned about whether those individuals would view the situation in the same light, she reported that she did not believe her supporters would perceive her actions negatively, and that she would use the same strategy again in the future. During Betty's interview, she identified her increase in confidence as a key outcome of her actions during this study. Specifically, she stated that while she did not believe that her functional knowledge had changed, her contributions were more valued by others because of her ability to present what she knows more confidently. Betty also indicated that her increased confidence has led to a more positive perception of her team's ability in the eyes of the managers with whom she interacts.

"I've gotten more respect from others that I know things, that I've thought about them, and can contribute something to discussions. I feel my contributions are more valued because of it. Not that I know anything different, but that I present it with more certainty and confidence."

Of the learning set participants, Julie expressed the greatest level of confidence in her abilities, and the greatest level of comfort in dealing with men and senior managers. She also indicated her belief that her ability to engage in organizational politics had not changed during the course of this study. Despite a relatively high degree of confidence, she related that still she encountered challenging situations when she was fearful of speaking up because of how she might be perceived by others, stating, "I'm afraid of being perceived as arrogant."

Despite this fear, she indicated that her purpose, to influence senior leaders, was important enough for her to overcome any discomfort she experienced by speaking up. Her reason for wanting to gain greater influence within this level of leadership was to ensure that the department was serving its customers to the best of its ability. When interviewing Julie, she stated that the key consequence of her political activity during the study was her renewed conviction to share her perspectives and recommendations, especially in situations where there were "elephants in the room." Where she had previously viewed this behaviour as being potentially risky and not always worth the energy and effort required, she stated that she now viewed her willingness to do so as a source of pride, recognizing the courage necessary to speak out when others would not.

4.3.3 Negative Self-Talk

As discussions progressed, the issue of confidence and negative self-talk continued, highlighting that for the women present, the lack of confidence they had expressed was not related necessarily to a lack of skill, but possibly to socialization. The learning set suggested that while boys received messages that they are capable and confident of achieving whatever they set their minds to, girls receive messages about being kind and nurturing, and caring for others. This was offered as a potential explanation for the assumptions that this group shared, and for their concerns when it came to behaving in ways that were not aligned with women's gender identity.

"My inner dialogue when dealing with senior managers keeps me from being more assertive."

"Most of my assumptions and self-talk are negative."

"If something seems easy, I worry that I've missed something, instead of believing that I'm smart or talented."

"The challenge is our own self-talk [...] we're doing the right thing but always questioning ourselves."

A question was posed to the group, asking what they could do to change or overcome this negative self-talk. The ideas that were offered included:

- intentionally being more assertive and standing up for oneself;
- reflecting on successes as a way of building greater confidence; and
- surrounding oneself with supporters, which would make it easier to provide input despite feelings of inadequacy.

Initially, all six women in this study agreed to take action and attempt to improve their confidence and the quality of the self-talk they were experiencing. Of the six, three were moderately successful, while two women reported being unable to act due to intense feelings of discomfort and because their actions felt disingenuous. The latter was accompanied by the statement that they never would have acted if not for the fact that they were participating in this study. The sixth stated that she hadn't found the 'right

opportunity', explaining that her perceptions of those above her in the organizational hierarchy prevented her from acting.

The three women who successfully took action to combat negative self-talk reported that they found their initial successes encouraging and would continue to practice activities to build their confidence. Cathy's strategy was similar to Betty's in that she sought the support of like-minded individuals when participating in meetings. She reported that if she could make eye contact with a supporter in the room, this person would frequently lend verbal or non-verbal credence to her statement. When this occurred, she noted that her contributions were taken more seriously, and she was able to have a greater impact on the topic of conversation.

Julie took action in a slightly different way, identifying her need to address the underlying assumptions that created her negative self-talk. Her strategy was to remain curious and intentionally ask more questions of both herself and others. In her words, she described it as, "I need to be both in the moment and watch the moment." Afterwards, Julie reported her goal of changing her self-talk as a journey, which would require ongoing attention. She shared with the group that her learnings from taking action included that she needed to be careful that her self-talk wasn't apparent to others through her body language, and that she was intentionally attempting to 'shake it off' when things did not go well for her.

Their comments at the end of the study included:

"I have to remind myself to ignore the noise in my head that prevents me from speaking openly."

"I'm smart. I need to give myself more credit."

"I'm not comfortable delivering presentations, but I didn't have that moment when I thought to myself, 'this isn't going well.'"

Summary: Political Will

The women in this study expressed three key barriers to their willingness to engage in political activity: purpose and intentionality, confidence, and self-talk. Negative self-talk was often associated with a lack of confidence, with participants stating that their thoughts and assumptions made them hesitant to act or speak, or to trust their abilities even in situations where they possessed expertise. Purpose and intentionality were both drivers and inhibitors of political engagement, since the women expressed their ability to behave politically to benefit others but demonstrated a tendency to withdraw from political activity if their actions were self-serving in nature.

4.4 Political Skill

The learning set highlighted almost from the start the belief that men and women behave differently, and that the same actions may be perceived differently depending on the gender of the person demonstrating the behaviour. As discussions continued, it became apparent that this broader category of political skill was comprised of several smaller categories, which were later labelled as:

- Political behaviours
- Gender Bias

The first section that follows is a discussion of the political behaviours and characteristics related to organizational politics, and a description of the actions taken by the learning set members in their efforts to increase their levels of informal power. This section is followed by a discussion of the gender biases identified within the learning set's working environment and describes how these impacted the effectiveness of the group's political activities.

4.4.1 Political Behaviours

Over the course of this study, the learning set identified several behaviours that they deemed to represent political activity. These behaviours have been summarized below (Table 4.7).

Table 4.7: Learning set summary of behaviours representing political activity

Behaviour	Explanation
Persistence	Relentlessly going after what one wants.
Decisiveness	Being quick to make a decision and move to action.
Assertiveness	Confidently contributing opinions and expertise; speaking up quickly, frequently and loudly to position oneself as an expert.
Building alliances	Developing strategic relationships with influential individuals to further one's goals.
Competitiveness	Acting competitively against others versus working collaboratively to accomplish goals.
Direct communication	Expressing oneself without thought for others' feelings.
Being proactive	Providing information and completing tasks before being asked; making oneself indispensable.
Persuasion	Influencing others towards a common goal or position; negotiating to reach agreement between conflicting views or priorities.
Self-promotion	Lobbying for oneself by highlighting one's accomplishments and background.
Adaptability	Assessing a situation and selecting the appropriate behaviours necessary to influence the individuals involved.

Despite the group's negative perception of some of these behaviours, such self-promotion and competitiveness, the women in this study acknowledged that individuals who they deemed to be good political actors employed all of the tactics listed above with varying results.

Though it is interesting to see the differences regarding the perception of behaviours constituting political activity, the goal of this study was to identify ways in which women could be more effective in organizational politics. For this reason, the focus of this section now turns to the skills employed by the members of the learning set and the results produced through their actions. The data analysis of the skills employed by the learning set members are summarized below, along with explanations of how the women approached each (Table 4.8).

Table 4.8: Learning set summary of behaviours employed to increase their informal power

Behaviour	Explanation
Persistence	Demonstrating persistence by restating messages in order to be heard by others.
Decisiveness	Being quick to make a decision and move to action.
Communicating assertively	Offering information and standing firm in one's areas of expertise; adjusting one's language to appear more confident and credible; moderating the use of emotion in communication.
Building alliances	Developing relationships with individuals to gain support for one's goals.

Persistence

The learning set defined this as demonstrating determination to continue working towards a specific goal. It was suggested in early discussions that this characteristic was associated more frequently with men, and that women would be far more likely to abandon an idea or strategy in the interests of maintaining friendly relations with others.

“We [women] value collegial support more than getting our way.”

“Where a man might keep going, a woman might back down.”

“Is it worth it to be attacked day after day and have to watch our backs?”

Despite the somewhat negative perception of this characteristic, Julie stated that she often relied upon this behaviour to bring attention to unpopular issues, and to highlight concerns in her interactions with senior leaders. She describes her motivation behind her actions as stemming from feeling “responsible for doing something.” While she believes in the importance of the work she does, she concedes that managers are not always receptive to her actions and that responses to her unrelenting drive to address certain things has negatively affected some of her working relationships. This does not include her relationship with her direct supervisor, which she states has improved as a result of this behaviour, citing a gain in political capital with her leader. In reflecting on her actions, Julie states that she has experienced two key learnings that will guide her in the future:

1. With the goal of better understanding her impact on others, she plans to ask more questions so that she can adjust her approach as needed.

2. Before speaking up, she plans to ask, “What’s the risk of not doing this?” as a method of gauging which situations are important enough for her to spend some of her political capital.

Cathy also embraced persistence, stating that she has begun to use repetition as a method of having her views and ideas heard. She related the experience of participating in a discussion about a topic that she was knowledgeable on. In this instance, she was one of many participants attending the meeting where the intention was for each table to collect ideas and information that would later be used to inform a larger departmental strategy. Cathy was seated at a table of four that contained two women and two men. Although she took a less active role in offering her thoughts, preferring to pose questions that would draw ideas from her tablemates, she observed that any comments that she offered were only recorded by the scribe, who was a woman, if approved of by the men. This implicit approval was offered nonverbally when one or both of the men would nod in response to Cathy’s input. When this occurred, the other woman would note down what Cathy had said. In those instances when the men did not provide this nonverbal approval, the scribe would not record anything. Further, Cathy realized that their notetaker would automatically record any comments made by the men, regardless of whether either woman made any verbal or nonverbal indication of their agreement. With the recognition of this behaviour, Cathy began to use repetition as a way of having her input captured, restating her comments until their scribe recorded what had been said. Since their discussion was structured in several rounds, she then took over the notetaking duties from the other woman to ensure the information being written down was a more representative balance of the input from their table.

Decisiveness

This behaviour was defined by study participants as making decisions quickly, even without complete information, with the objective of enabling swift action. Several women cited their lack of confidence in their abilities as a barrier and reported missing out on opportunities due to the time needed for them to make a decision or to act. Cathy was the first to take action in this area, defining a need to be more decisive as representing her participation in a greater number of work activities when opportunities presented themselves. She explained that she would often hesitate to accept certain types of work because she felt unsure about her ability to complete it, and worried that her continued refusal to take on certain tasks would undermine her goal of career growth. She made the decision to accept a greater scope of tasks, at the same time that she began accepting more meeting invitations, even when she did not perceive herself as being an expert on the work being addressed. Cathy discovered that her

increased presence at meetings led to greater exposure to influential individuals, and that her success in contributing relevant information to discussions increased both her confidence and her credibility among the management team.

Betty also resolved to be more decisive in those areas that fell under her purview.

“I’m doing things and deciding faster. With the new work being done, I just have to do it rather than pulling in other people, etc. By doing it, I’ve realized that I *can* do it, and have built my confidence and trust in my ability to do certain things.”

She enacted this resolution by creating a strategic plan for her team, despite not yet having information from senior managers about the department’s priorities. She made this choice because she felt it important to be able to give her direct reports direction about the work they should be focused on, rather than allowing them to flounder due to the lack of information from higher levels. Betty reported that her tactic was effective in several ways:

1. It allowed her team to allocate resources to work that was aligned with their strategy, which increased the quality of results being produced and improved the team’s reputation with their internal clients.
2. Betty became more effective in building alliances to support her team’s work because she was able to more clearly articulate her team’s purpose as stated in the strategic plan.

Communicating Assertively

This behaviour was described as expressing oneself with confidence, so that others would find the speaker and their message credible, which involved a change in the women’s word choice and use of emotion. To this end, Cathy offered her insight to the learning set approximately half-way through this study, stating that she believed that certain phrases were undermining her messages. She had begun to listen to men and had noted differences in the language they used when providing input or indicating their expertise.

“I noticed when listening to a man and a woman that they used different words, and how they came across was different. “Just” and “I think” can diminish the credibility of what women are

saying. Men say “it is” as if it’s fact, and say it loudly. Our words and how we say something has an impact on how we’re perceived by others.”

Examples of this are provided below in Table 4.9.

Table 4.9: Differences in language between genders

Men	Women
I know...	I think...
It is...	I believe...
The facts are...	I just want to let you know...

When she began to pay attention how men and women speak, she also observed that each gender is received differently, depending on their word choice. Cathy resolved to take action on this realization and decided to attempt to change her language by removing phrases such as “I think” and “I just” from her conversations. Betty and Julie agreed with Cathy’s assessment that the use of these phrases could be undermining their impact and decided to also replace them in their vocabulary. Jackie offered a counterpoint to this perspective, stating that she would continue to use this language, as she always intentionally has, to avoid being perceived as arrogant by others. Before the conclusion of this study, Diane had also begun to pay attention to her use of these words and had reached the same conclusion as the others who had decided to remove them from their discourse.

During the individual interviews, some of the women commented on the impact of their shift in language, which in some cases extended beyond the initial phrases identified above. Betty explained that she had built on Cathy’s observations and had continued to look for ways in which she might be undermining her position which she described as “already somewhat passive.” In addition to avoiding the use of the phrases identified earlier, she purposefully focused on expressing her opinions as statements of fact rather than as questions to be considered by her audience. She reported that this has been especially effective when presenting information to senior leaders and believes that she has increased her level of confidence and credibility as a result.

Diane also commented on the effect that changing her language had had, indicating that she believed that removal of these phrases helped others to see her as a better fit in her role as leader. “...they don’t need a leader who just *thinks* they know something, but that they *know* something when they say it.” In

addition to her own experience, Diane commented on Betty's results, stating that she had observed her colleague taking more risks and inserting herself more into discussions, demonstrating a level of confidence that had been previously absent.

Another component of assertive communication was the ability to contribute ideas and expertise quickly, and to stand firm when challenged within one's area of knowledge or scope of responsibility. The women in this study again cited a lack of confidence as impeding their ability to demonstrate the behaviours they identified as belonging to this dimension. Following the first learning set meeting, Jackie had identified expressing her opinion more frequently as an action for herself. When recounting her experiences to the group, she stated that she had felt that she had previously made some progress in this area by becoming more verbal and communicative. She was surprised to discover that this was not actually the case and summarized her attempt to be more assertive as follows: "Because I perceive myself as not having anything of value to say, I end up staying silent."

Susan's experience was similar when she undertook to become more assertive in her interactions with others. Repeatedly, she described her inability to follow through on her plan, stating that she never found the "right moment" to be assertive. Upon reflection on her inaction, she explained that her inner dialogue kept her from standing by her views, citing a fear of what might happen if she did. Further, she expressed that she had learned that these fears were not present when she was dealing with individuals with whom she had developed a relationship, suggesting that her assertiveness was directly related to the strength of the ties she had developed with others. Betty experienced the greatest success in this facet of political skill, participating more frequently and more confidently in discussions due to the work she had done in building alliances, which is discussed in the next section. Her experience supports the notion that, when working within an organizational system, actions in one area can have positive affects on other areas.

The last example of actions taken in communicating assertively was shared by Julie who was viewed as the individual in this study most likely to communicate difficult messages. Despite that, she expressed a frequent frustration that she was not being "heard" by other managers in the department. To rectify this, Julie resolved to be more direct in her communication by bluntly presenting her case to a senior manager. She found that the manager was surprised by her approach, both because it was unlike her and due to the directness of her message. Julie believed her new approach to be effective and indicated

her intention to use it again in future discussions, despite stating that the result of her tactic was neutral, meaning that the senior manager had not acted upon her message in any way.

Building Alliances

Building alliances was used to encompass the development of mutually-beneficial relationships and leveraging one's network in order to further objectives. This dimension was a key one for learning set members and highlighted distinct differences in perception regarding the intention behind establishing relationships and the use of those relationships at work. "We [women] define relationships differently, we invest differently, and we expect different things." The learning set highlighted the need to be authentic in their development of support networks, stating that relationships should be grounded in similar interests and a genuine desire to get to know one another. They eschewed the idea of what they called "surface relationships" where the primary goal was to use one's connection with someone in order to accomplish a specific outcome: "Do we want to behave differently with someone – for example, being chummy chummy – just to get what we want?" The view expressed by everyone was that they would prefer to "establish some sort of rapport first before talking shop to further an initiative."

Betty was the first to actively attempt to leverage her relationships to gain support for her work, starting with non-verbal cues during meetings that reinforced her position, and moving to the purposeful creation of alliances prior to important discussions where she anticipated resistance to what she was trying to accomplish. Betty considered the intentional use of relationships to be a very effective strategy, which she stated allowed her to strengthen her standing in departmental meetings. She indicated that her level of discomfort with this tactic was directly related to the depth of the relationship with those individuals in her coalition, explaining that the stronger the bond, the less likely she felt that she was using the other person to get her way.

4.4.2 Gender Bias

During this study, learning set participants expressed the belief that gender bias played a role in both how their actions were perceived by others, and the expectations others placed on their behaviours. What follows is a description of how this bias was experienced.

Differences in Perception

At the start of the learning sets, participants quickly stated their belief that men and women are judged differently, and that certain behaviours could only be demonstrated by men because they would reflect negatively on women. For example, Julie offered the following about a senior male manager in the department:

“Men can behave in certain ways – for example, being silly at work by bursting into a meeting – and still be taken seriously. Women have to be more qualified than men to be considered as good or qualified.”

Another comment by Susan highlighted not only a difference in perception of men and women, but pointed to the gender bias present in the culture within which was seen to constrain how the women could operate:

“[Women] perceived as clawing their way to the top. The language is powerful in that phrase in that it’s not about the climbing, but about doing something else and leaving scars behind. That you actually have to take a piece out of someone to get somewhere. [I] have never heard men being referred to as clawing their way. There’s a negative perception of behaviours that women demonstrate, even though they may be the same ones that men demonstrate. Do the “nice” men act any differently or are they perceived differently?”

Others offered similar views, stating that if a woman demonstrated some of the behaviours that the department’s managers do, the woman would be labelled a “flake.”

“That leader, if he was a woman, would be eaten alive for his style and his decisions.”

To the learning set, this suggested that women need to censor their actions to carefully craft an image of themselves that is based in paradox, whereby they need to behave in more traditionally masculine ways, but not overly so, as was highlighted by Betty: “There is a stereotype of what type of woman is allowed to move into certain leadership positions [...] can’t move into that role because that’s not who I am.”

The learning set noted that there were several behaviours that women needed to use to earn the attention and respect of male leaders, which are described in Table 4.10.

Table 4.10: How women can gain the attention and respect of male leaders

Behaviour/Trait	Explanation
Smart	Being knowledgeable in one's area and having the expertise to support claims made and work taken on.
Self-promotion	Selling self to others in order to establish and maintain credibility, and to get access to opportunities and power.
Confidence	Behaving in a manner that demonstrates capability, knowledge, expertise, and belief in oneself.
Extraversion	Being vocal in discussions to offer input and recommendations.

While the above were suggested as effective ways of increasing one's access to power, the group also stated that there were certain behaviours, often associated with women, that were not valued in their workplace or ascribed to leaders. This included style differences in communication, the use of emotion at work, and the investment made by women in relationships.

"Men believe women come from an emotional perspective and we [women] have to check ourselves against the norms in order to influence others."

"There is less value placed on certain behaviours, which may be reflective of our views of what a leader should be, act like, etc. Here, you need to be assertive to be heard – it's what gets you noticed. We [women] value a sense of community and collegial support more than men."

Communication

One of the areas identified where gender bias could influence a woman's effectiveness was communication, and an example of this is offered above in the section on Political Behaviours, Communicating Assertively, where the experience of changing certain phrases positively impacted several women's outcomes. Julie shared another insight regarding word choice, explaining that it was her tendency to share credit or promote others when communicating information. For example, she would say "**We** have this plan" rather than "**I** have this plan", placing emphasis on her collaboration with others. While learning set members agreed that it was necessary at times to promote oneself, they also

stated that it would only be deemed appropriate to do so if the idea was truly owned solely by the individual. In cases where this was not the case, they believed it would be unethical to present an idea as its owner if it had been the result of a group effort. The women in this study expressed a belief that this latter view was specific to their gender, and in their opinion, most men would not make this distinction nor consider it to be inappropriate to present an idea as their own. Diane offered this observation to summarize the group's views:

"[I] don't think men are shy about letting you know who they are, what they have to offer, and what they think."

The learning set also discussed the topic of presence, suggesting that men tend to garner attention more easily than women when they are speaking. Betty described it as: "No matter how competent, smart, or confident a woman is, they don't take up that 'space' or draw the attention. [...] No matter what it is, women don't seem to command the same presence." Rather than this being a bi-product of skill or behaviour, the women believed this to be another product of working within a masculine-dominated environment. This factor was perceived as a barrier to participation in meetings and other discussions where the women wanted to provide input.

Relationships

When discussions turned to relationships, the learning set reported their belief that women and men view relationships very differently. Men, they stated, take a transactional view, whereby accomplishing their goals through others is perfectly acceptable. In this context, they described relationships that were unidirectional and self-serving, in which one party is used by the other to reach a particular outcome.

"[For men] the outcome is more important than how they get there."

This is contrasted with women's views on relationships, which the learning set described as being based on personal knowledge of the other person, rapport, and reciprocity.

"Women define relationships differently, we invest differently and expect different things. Men end relationships more easily."

“Women [managers] did things more through friendships versus being more transactional [like men].”

In these contexts, the defining factor seemed to be the intention behind the relationship, with study participants indicating that they perceived the development and subsequent leveraging of relationships for one’s own benefit as being wrong. Susan offered an example of this type of behaviour, which she found to be inappropriate: “[Men] have a meeting after the meeting where the alliances happen to work on their own agendas.” This view was countered by Julie’s statement that she is willing to engage in this type of political activity as long as the outcomes are in the best interests of the organization’s customers. Others in the learning set echoed this perspective, stating that the purpose behind this tactic determined whether they would approve of it or not.

As this study progressed, and several of the women tried to take action by networking or creating new alliances to increase their influence, the topic of intentionality and purpose continued to arise. For Jackie, her failed attempt and intense discomfort with networking was blamed on the fact that she was advocating for herself versus others. Susan described her inability to influence individuals when missing a strong relationship with them, and Betty stated she felt guilty when leveraging relationships with individuals for her own purposes. In each instance, the women explained that they possessed the skills necessary to develop and use relationships with others to their own advantage, but had difficulty doing so unless their actions were linked to a larger objective or benefited people other than themselves. This perspective persisted despite the acknowledgement that abstaining from this behaviour could negatively impact the women’s political capital.

Value of Feminine Characteristics

The third key area that seemingly affected women’s effectiveness in organizational politics was the overall value placed on behaviours and characteristics that have been traditionally described as feminine. These include items such as highlighting the accomplishments of others, considering the impact of one’s actions on other people, and the use of emotion in workplace decisions. As stated earlier, the women in this study expressed their belief that women’s traits were less valued in their department, and that those individuals who were successful political actors embraced more of the behaviours associated with men.

“What we do isn’t valued by men or women.”

One of the first discussions regarding this perception centred on the use of emotion in the workplace. This was highlighted as being a factor in communication, interpersonal relationships, and collaboration. Julie suggested that emotion was a barrier for women because men believe women to be compromised and illogical as a result of their feelings. Cathy offered her support of this perspective by saying:

“[There is a] male dominated view of the world – rational, logical.”

Julie then recounted an experience when she and another female peer were in conflict due to a lack of competency in the work being done. When Julie approached her male director, stating that she and her colleague had been unable to resolve their differences, her leader told her, “you must get over your emotions.” She went on to express her opinion that men also misinterpret expressions of emotion, such as crying, for sadness, when they actually represent feelings of anger or frustration about something that has happened. The other women supported her views, stating “we have to check ourselves against the [organizational] norms in order to influence others.”

Not believing that she would be able to get her male colleagues to understand their misconceptions regarding emotion, Julie instead chose to try to remove emotion from her communication when trying to get a recommendation approved by a male manager. She explained her experience of writing an e-mail to this manager, and agonizing over her approach, stating that highlighting the people side would have been a more powerful approach than focusing on the financial aspects involved. Her reticence for using emotion as a persuasion tactic was directly related to her fear that her assessment of the situation would be dismissed because she is a woman. After revising her message several times, she finally settled on a version that included both aspects of the situation, the personal/emotional side and the financial side. She reported that her e-mail was positively received by the manager, although he had expressed some discomfort with the emotional portion of her argument. Julie also expressed how challenging the experience had been for her but commented that because her message had produced a benefit for the business, it was worth the energy and effort she had expended to craft it.

Another aspect where gender bias was seen as influencing the interpretation and effectiveness of behaviours was in the realm of adaptiveness and consideration for others. In the context of working

relationships, the learning set expressed their belief that women often adapted their workstyles to suit men, and that men did not do the same for women. Further, they stated that men expected this type of accommodation from their female colleagues.

“Men are unlikely to change their approach for a woman, but expect women to adjust their approach for them. We do it happily and feel pride in our ability to do so.”

Cathy offered the following example of this view, relating her experience of coaching a male manager who indicated his expectation for her to adapt to him by saying, “Remember, I’m a boy.” The women in this study reported that the differences in communication expectations went beyond style accommodations, also citing behaviours such as interruptions which they felt were inappropriate, but which men engaged in regularly. The rationale behind this evaluation was that it was important to consider the impact that one was having on others, and that if that impact was negative, then the behaviour was inappropriate. This reasoning extended to other behaviours, such as dismissing individuals’ ideas or completing ignoring others’ input. An example of this was discussed earlier in the Persistence section under Political Behaviours, in which Cathy discovered that her comments were not being recorded by the scribe unless they received tacit approval from the men present. When faced with these types of experiences, the women concluded that their combination of knowledge, skills and traits were less valued within their workplace than those of their male counterparts.

Chapter Summary

The data produced from this study offered many insights into the experiences surrounding organizational politics and the associated behaviours. As was stated at the start of this chapter, it became apparent when analyzing the data from this study that organizational context, political will, and political skill are inexorably intertwined and must be considered together when attempting to understand how women can access greater informal power. Although the objective of this research was not the development of generalizable information, it does offer several insights, both for individuals wanting to increase their level of political proficiency and for organizations desiring to support individuals in their efforts. From a practitioner's perspective, this study provided participants with the opportunity to take action and improve their individual situations, and to learn from both their own and others' results, enabling two of the six women to increase their level of informal power. While the other women in this study did not cite specific changes in their ability or engagement in organizational politics, they did relate significant insights regarding their choices to either continue acting politically or to withdraw from political situations. From this perspective, they related that their experiences during this project provided them with greater confidence in their political skill, the ability to recognize politically-charged situations, and to intentionally identify the instances that were important enough for them to behave politically. These findings are discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Reflections and Implications

The objective of this research project was to explore organizational politics as a means of enhancing women's access to informal and formal power. As such, a key focus was to discover the ways in which women experience and understand political activity, and how they can become more active and successful political actors. As a result of the information gathered during this project, and the input of action learning participants' during the process of meaning making, I offer the following as a discussion of what my findings represent.

5.1 Discussion

5.1.1 Political will precedes political skill

In the individual interviews that followed the conclusion of the learning sets, participants were asked to rate their ability to engage in organizational politics at the end of the study as compared to where they started. Four of the six women rated themselves higher but indicated that their level of skill had not changed. Instead, it was their level of willingness that had increased, allowing them to exercise the skills they possessed in acting politically. This aligns with the assertion of Shaughnessy *et al.* (2017) that a desire for greater power is necessary to engage in political activity. This result indicates that it may be possible for women to increase their level of engagement in organizational politics, thereby accessing greater informal and formal power, if their level of political will increases. In the case of this study, this required the presence of a clear purpose or objective to be accomplished. It was the presence of this objective that was observed as assisting women in overcoming their reluctance to behave politically due to negative self-talk or low levels of confidence.

Additionally, the women in this study repeatedly stated that they felt most comfortable taking political action when their objective was linked to the needs of the organization or others, reflecting the view of Kapoutsis *et al.* (2017) that political will can stem from the desire to help others. Further, they expressed the belief that this set them apart from their male counterparts, who they perceived as more often acting in their own, rather than others', best interests. This difference may be related to the general discomfort that women express with the concept of power, which men are more likely to pursue (Doldor, 2013). This discomfort can present a barrier for women because power and politics are intertwined (Mann, 1985), suggesting that one cannot be achieved and maintained without the other.

5.1.2 Political skill is moderated by organizational context and gender bias

The literature describes the existence of gender bias which guides individuals' expectations of how men and women should behave. When acting in accordance with these beliefs, women and men are deemed as acting appropriately. Acting differently, or demonstrating behaviours that are traditionally associated with the opposite gender, can cause people to judge a person's behaviours negatively. This difference in how an individual is perceived can impact the effectiveness their actions and one's overall assessment of the character of that individual. This study produced a list of behaviours that the learning set identified as being used effectively by political actors, however the participants noted that they were not willing to embrace all of them, supporting the literature that describes organizational politics in negative terms (Forret and Dougherty, 2001; Drory and Vigoa-Gadot, 2010; Doldor *et al.*, 2013). In some instances, this reticence was linked to a negative perception of the behaviour, while on other occasions, it was noted that a woman would be perceived negatively for demonstrating a particular behaviour. This indicates that while there may be a universal set of political behaviours, men and women are also evaluated differently for their demonstration of these actions, as asserted by Crawford and Mills (2011) and Pick (2017). Therefore, women must moderate their behaviours based on the cultural norms and biases present within their workplace.

5.1.3 Political will does not correlate to perceptions of political skill

The women in this research project focused on their political will, more than their political skill, when discussing the results of their participation in this study. Despite having experimented with new behaviours that fell under the realm of political skill, participants did not cite any improvements in this area.

5.1.4 Engagement in organizational politics relies upon agency and structure

This study was largely focused on the participants' agency to change the degree of informal power available to them. From that perspective, this research project could be characterized as "fix the women" (Ely *et al.*, 2011), despite the fact that the goal was not to better socialize study participants to the nature of working in a masculine environment. Since I did not have organizational support to intervene at that level, the interventions enacted were taken by the women participating, trying a variety of actions, some of which were effective in moving them closer to their goals. Throughout this study, the women also referred to specific challenges they faced when acting politically, and highlighted actions that the organization could take to make things easier for them. The literature on this topic

suggests the same, stating that women are best supported when actions taken address both agency and structure (Thomas *et al.*, 2004; Mavin, 2008; Weidenfeller, 2012). This indicates that attention to both agency and structure would offer the greatest value to assist women seeking increased informal power through political activity.

5.1.5 Individual actions can impact the organizational system

Each of the women in this study shared the common, high-level objective of increasing their informal power. However, each month each participant identified actions that focused on their individual circumstances, based on what they believed would work best in their situations. While some produced outcomes that improved their circumstances, the group also collectively produced changes in the system in which they operated, demonstrating that actions taken in one part of a system can impact other parts. This outcome aligns with the literature that identifies organizations as complex systems, demonstrating the interconnectedness that exists between individuals and the systems they operate within (Herasymowich and Senko, 2002; Senge, 2006).

5.1.6 Sharing experiences with other women positively impacts political will

Although not identified as a category within the coding framework, the women repeatedly expressed their appreciation for the learning sets, explaining that they took comfort in knowing that they were not alone in the challenges they had faced as women professionals. Diane and Jackie both indicated that this was the greatest benefit they experienced from participating in the study, and that this awareness had a positive effect on their confidence when it came to the demonstration of political behaviours. Similarly, Julie stated that while her political proficiency had remained largely unchanged, she no longer felt alone. That knowledge provided her with renewed energy to “keep fighting the good fight”, and “help others share their voice.” This was an unexpected outcome of this study and reflects findings that are similar to those produced when action learning is used as part of women’s leadership development programs (DeFrank-Cole *et al.*, 2016; Sugiyama *et al.*, 2016). This suggests that providing women with opportunities to share their stories, and to learn from one another, can bolster women’s confidence, re-energize them, and provide ideas about how they can engage in organizational politics more effectively.

Summary: Discussion

This section describes the meaning that I and the learning set members have developed from the data collected during the action learning sets and individual interviews. Where appropriate, I have also referenced the quantitative data collected through the online survey and linked it to the overall themes that emerged over the course of this study. In the next section, I describe the specific personal learnings that occurred for me as a scholar-practitioner, and the potential implications of this research project.

The next section of this thesis further elaborates on the implications of the findings discussed here, with specific attention to three areas:

- Implications for other women professionals;
- Implications for the researcher; and
- Implications for other masculine-dominated organizations and industries.

Within this framework, an assessment is offered of the action research project, highlighting those things that worked well, and suggested changes for future research projects. Also included are links to the literature on this topic, and a description of the specific personal learnings that occurred for me as a scholar-practitioner.

5.2 Reflections and Implications

The focus of this study was assisting professional women to engage more effectively in organizational politics, so they might access increased levels of informal power. This stemmed from my own experiences as a woman working in a geographical area that is primarily dominated by men due to the number of people employed in the oil and gas industry, and the research I completed earlier in my studies that highlighted the continued struggles of women in gaining influence and positions of greater authority. The literature reviewed, both earlier in my studies and during the development of my research proposal, offered a multitude of reasons for the relatively low number of women represented in masculine-dominated sectors and in senior management positions. The majority of the literature reviewed focused on formal processes and policies, or interventions aimed at educating women in different skillsets, however almost none addressed the issue of organizational politics and its potential impact on women's success. It was this realization that shaped this research project, with the original objective being the identification of strategies to help professional women access greater power through engagement in organizational politics.

This desire to improve the conditions for professional women led to the selection of action research, with a significant investment of time spent on action learning, both of which are underpinned by their ability to create change for the individuals involved. While this goal addresses the beta system of Revans' action learning model (Coghlan and Coghlan, 2010), or learning for others, just as important were objectives identified for the alpha and gamma systems. To this end, I also sought learning for myself as a researcher and practitioner, and for other organizations or industries wanting to enable women's engagement in organizational politics. By addressing these two systems, I sought knowledge that would both enable my ongoing journey as a scholar-practitioner, and assist me in my role as a consultant, by being able to offer better recommendations to clients seeking advice on this topic. From an action research perspective, the attention to these three areas reflects first-person inquiry on my part as the researcher, second-person inquiry through collaboration with research participants, and a foundation for third-person inquiry in the form of suggestions for others operating within similar environments (Bradbury and Reason, 2003). This chapter describes the resulting learnings and recommendations, and offers my reflections on the action research process. In some instances, I have also described my personal learning, which reflects the changes in my thinking during my journey to become a scholar-practitioner.

5.2.1 Reflections on Action Research: Implications for Practice

The following section provides an overview of the action research process undertaken, highlighting strengths and weaknesses of the process, and recommended adjustments that have influenced my practice and which may help to improve other scholar-practitioners' work.

5.2.1.1 Action research processes do not guarantee everyone's active participation

Action research is both collaborative and participatory, relying on the individuals who engage with one another to work together to address a shared problem. Stringer (1999) states that it is most effective when those involved demonstrate significant levels of engagement, and encourages activities that individuals can accomplish on their own. While it appeared that both of these factors were in place during the course of this study, it became apparent approximately half-way through the action learning sets that participants were not equally involved. This was demonstrated by a lack of action taken by some, or a focus on offering explanations for inaction during the monthly set meetings that occurred. In reflection, this lower degree of participation can be attributed to the lack of motivation that appeared around behaving politically. The necessity of political will as an enabler of political skill is discussed in the

prevailing literature on this topic, and my experiences during this study support this assertion, with those women not taking action and engaging politically citing the lack of a compelling reason as their explanation for inaction.

Implicit in the action learning process that provided a structure for this study is the accountability of participants to one another for actions taken, as well as inaction. Therefore, I did not anticipate that it might be possible that a portion of the study participants might not act, or act in more passive ways, such as attempting actions that seemed less intimidating once their peers had experienced success. I had incorrectly assumed that the action learning process, along with the bonds that existed between participants, would be sufficient to motivate action. Further, I had assumed that the women's desire to participate in this study meant that they would be motivated to increase their level of political engagement, which would spur them into taking action each month. This was not the case, and could have potentially been a barrier to the goal of creating change if there had been a reliance upon everyone in the study to do their part in moving things forward. Lastly, although I was aware of this potential risk, I found that I had almost no ability to influence the participants to take action when they desired to remain passive.

Personal Learning

I had participated in action learning sets in the past, as both a set member and as a facilitator, and because of these past experiences, had incorrectly assumed that using action learning as both an intervention and data collection method would be a relatively simple undertaking due to structure of the action learning process. As learning set meetings progressed, I discovered the concern that not everyone was consistently taking action, and also struggled to adequately capture everyone's reflections and learnings. This latter issue resulted from the occasional reticence on the part of learning set members to share certain details, and also from not always using their journals to capture their reflections after taking action. I found myself continuously having to make notes about information to share or to research that related to each month's discussions, as I attempted to fulfil my dual role of researcher and facilitator. Most significant for me was the fact that I was no longer the expert in the group, which is typically the expectation in my role as consultant. In some instances, I believe my contributions in challenging underlying beliefs and contributing knowledge were useful in moving the group forward, but in many cases I found myself grateful for the critical thinking present in the set members, two of whom were especially talented at posing questions that caused the group to reflect

upon unconscious beliefs that had influenced others' thinking and actions. This latter realization was a key learning for me as it emphasized the power of the collaborative nature of action learning. This experience highlighted that it was unnecessary, and even ineffective at times, for me to participate as an expert, since the contributions of others were frequently those that produced new ways of thinking and led to key actions.

5.2.1.2 Learning comes from inaction, as well as action

When I realized that half of the learning set was not taking action as actively as the other participants, I was concerned that this would not only compromise the results of this study, but that those women would become disengaged and disappointed with their outcomes. While these women's results were not ones that could be categorized as external or visible changes, such as an increased workplace profile or additional responsibilities, these women recounted significant internal changes they had experienced as a result of their participation. First, they described the way that their views about organizational politics had changed for the better, stating that while they may still choose not to act politically, they no longer believe organizational politics to be a negative concept. Second, they explained their insights regarding political will and skill, stating that, if motivated by a meaningful purpose, they would have no problem acting politically, certain that they possessed the skills to do so. Third, the women indicated their increased confidence levels, resulting from the realization that they could be skilled political actors, and that they had the power to decide when to, and when not to engage politically. This result supports Herasymowich and Senko's (2007) assertion that the focus of the action learning process is on the learning that occurs whether actions are taken or not. In the latter case, the role of learning set members is to help those individuals who have not acted understand why, and to learn from those experiences. I credit this factor as a primary reason for the group's continued success, since those members who did not take action still participated fully in the reflection and sharing learnings portion of this study.

Personal Learning

I highlighted for the previous point my concern surrounding the fact that not all of the action learning set members were taking action every month to implement a change intervention that might improve their circumstances. This was problematic to me because I was evaluating the value of their participation through the lens of a consultant, meaning that I was equating success with tangible results. With this viewpoint, I was demonstrating one of the concerns that often plagues practitioners using

action learning within corporate settings, which Fenwick (2003, p. 622) describes as the drive for “visible, value-added outcomes” as a measure of success. It was not until the midpoint of our meetings that this view began to shift as I observed the learning that was resulting from reflection on inaction, especially as learning set members were challenged to examine the underlying beliefs that stopped people from acting. Until this time, I had been aware that learning could result from inaction, but I didn’t truly understand how this was possible, which prompted me to continuously try to encourage the learning set members to act. This action was largely unsuccessful and frustrating as a result, and upon reflection, I realize that it was an attempt to try and control what was happening, which went against the collaborative nature of action learning. Additionally, had I been successful, I believe that valuable learnings would have been lost, since the conversations around inaction highlighted and tested belief systems that may have otherwise remained untouched. This experience was a valuable reminder that in action learning, greater value is placed on the questions being asked rather than the solutions being generated (Brook *et al.*, 2015).

5.2.1.3 Action research creates change at both individual and systemic levels

In this study, all of the participants involved shared the same problem; specifically, how to better engage politically to extend their power. However, they did not share a common workplace goal in the traditional sense, such as completing a project, introducing a new process, or securing support for an initiative. Individually, half of the group indicated positive changes, or an increase in their informal power, stemming from political action. The other half of the group also related changes that had occurred, specifically to their thinking about organizational politics and their knowledge of themselves. Although organizational changes were not the focus of this study, participants identified ways in which their organizational system had also shifted. This became clear when the systems map created at the start of this study was compared to a map created at the end of the study, indicating that the individual actions of participants created ripples in the system, causing the archetypal view of the system to change, and in some instances, improve.

Personal Learning

While the objective of this research project was to enhance women’s influence through political engagement, I was also hopeful that their actions would produce changes at a systemic level. Having been introduced to systems thinking over a decade ago, I found it difficult to separate the learning set participants from their environment, believing strongly in the interconnectedness that exists within an

organizational system. This belief, supported by earlier coursework that discussed the importance of shared language, led to me introduce the learning set members to a set of positive and negative archetypes, and to develop the resulting systems maps. Originally, I had anticipated that these maps would be critical in assisting the group in planning their interventions, with the ability to test their ideas against their organizational system so they could anticipate the potential consequences of their actions, and mitigate any unintended results. In practice, this did not occur, with the learning set having no interest in the archetypes or systems maps beyond their initial creation and final review at the conclusion of the study. Upon reflection, I realize that I did not effectively explain the power of systems archetypes when attempting to create change and, more importantly, that these systems maps would have been far more useful if the learning set had been focused on a shared workplace problem where everyone was participating in the same action each month. Since each woman was acting individually, the systems maps were less relevant and are a step that I would remove in future, similar situations.

5.2.1.4 Strong relationships with other study participants is both a benefit and a hindrance

The learning set participants represented members of an intact work group, along with one additional woman who worked closely with the team, resulting in a high level of familiarity among team members. The organizational positions and pre-existing relationship between participants produced both benefits and drawbacks during the course of this study. The key benefit was the level of trust and support that existed from the first learning set meeting. These strong relationships enabled processes such as developing learning set ground rules and mapping the departmental system to proceed quickly and easily. Further, since two or more of the women often attended the same workplace meetings or interacted during other professional situations, it was not unusual for more than one view to be offered when a participant was relating her experiences to the learning set. This typically provided deeper insights than might have otherwise been produced and demonstrated support and encouragement for participants.

The primary drawback was the censoring of certain information that might cast the speaker in a poor light. To my knowledge, this occurred at least three times during this study, with participants disclosing information to me privately via e-mail or during the individual interviews. In each instance, the women explained their fear of being perceived badly by the other members of the set and of damaging the relationships they had with their colleagues. Bournier and Frost (1996) state that action learning sets create a sense of comfort and safety, where members can explore their weaknesses. As a result of this

belief, the individual responses described above were unexpected, and suggest that the safe environment created by a learning set is not always sufficient to overcome individuals' fears, thereby leading them to censor what they share with the group. Concerned that withholding information from the learning set would negatively impact everyone's learning, I attempted to negotiate alternate ways to share their comments with the learning set but was unsuccessful in each of my attempts. It is difficult to predict the effect that this had on participants' learning, however I firmly believe that the group would have gained value from discussions of the information they shared with me, as well as from the process of discussing the reasons for their reticence in sharing the information in the first place.

Related to the censorship of information described above, another issue associated with the members of this learning set is the likelihood of groupthink and the lack of diverse perspectives offered by the group. Given that certain members were concerned about damaging their relationships with others, it is highly probable that they may have withheld contradictory comments at times or refrained from challenging others' perspectives. While I was an outsider to the group and did not share these inhibitions, mine was only one voice of dissent in raising alternate viewpoints, which were also influenced by my own biases. It is likely that with a more diverse group, the ideas and actions pursued would have represented greater experimentation, impacting the learning of everyone involved. While the relationships between learning set members eased certain processes, I believe that the value of greater diversity exceeds the benefits gained from working with an intact team.

5.2.1.5 Sharing experiences offers benefits beyond knowledge of the topic

While the participants in this study developed a better understanding of the nature of organizational politics, and how they might become more active politically, they also related the comfort they received from sharing similar stories. Unanimously, the group agreed that there was value in knowing that they were not alone in experiencing some of the biases and other challenges associated with being a woman professional. Further, they applauded the courage of their female peers and leaders who navigated politics effectively and who continued to make the effort to engage in organizational politics despite expressing their distaste for it. This reflects the literature reviewed on WOLD programs, which highlights the importance of including opportunities for women to discuss gender bias and how to address it as part of their leadership development (Ely *et al.*, 2011; Stead and Elliott, 2012).

Personal Learning

With my previously described focus on tangible results, I was surprised to find that the process of sharing experiences with others produced intangible benefits to those participating in the learning set. Thomas *et al.* (2004) offer women's networks as a potential method of enabling women's careers, however I had always interpreted this as more of an opportunity to build relationships with others in influential positions or to obtain advice about how to navigate one's career. Involvement with this learning set highlighted that networks such as these can produce value beyond networking and discussions of strategy, providing support and energy when faced with workplace challenges that are unique to women professionals.

5.2.1.6 Women's professional success relies upon both agency and structure

Many organizations have expressed to me their desire to improve the experience of professional women and have described programs that they have introduced in support of this objective. This includes strategies such as mentoring programs, developmental events with successful women role models as speakers, and the revision of policies governing maternity and paternity leaves, two of which are examples of "fix the women" interventions, with the latter being an example of a "fix the system" (Clayton, 2011) initiative. Conversely, many women have described to me their own actions in creating professional success, citing the adoption of masculine behaviours and forcefully gaining entry into traditionally men-only activities in order to access those with power. Given what I know from clients and women professionals, combined with the information gained during this study, I now believe that a single focus on either structure or agency produces only limited results, and the true power lies in a combined focus on both. For example, this could entail a selection process that identifies women's motivation before enrolling them in a training program about political acumen. For those women both skilled and willing to engage politically, organized workplace opportunities to network and explicitly build influential relationships would make it easier for women to access powerful or senior-level individuals. Similar suggestions exist in the literature that address the issue of women's leadership development, extending that these types of networks can provide women greater access to informal assistance and career opportunities (Ely *et al.*, 2011). This is further reinforced by participants' comments, which offered insights into behaviours that women use effectively to gain influence, paired with specific suggestions for their employer, which they stated would make it easier for them to engage in political activity. This knowledge now informs my recommendations to those clients seeking to enable women's careers.

Personal Learning

In my role as a consultant, I am often placed into the position of offering recommendations to my clients to solve organizational issues, which includes those related to their human resources. As a woman, I have often faced many of the challenges that other professional women face, especially because of the strong influence of the oil and gas sector in Alberta, which is largely dominated by men. While I believe in the work that I do professionally, I was also driven by an underlying belief that women could change their circumstances, regardless of the organizational support they received. This is not to negate my belief that organizations should do what they can to assist women in succeeding, but to highlight that I had always placed greater emphasis on women's agency rather than structure. This study forced me to reconsider this stance, especially as I delved further into the literature and heard from the women in the learning set specific ways in which they believed the organization could better support their efforts. As a result, I discovered an underlying belief which was negatively influencing my views about women who had been unsuccessful challenging men, leading me to unfairly judge them as being incapable or lacking the characteristics necessary to be effective in certain environments.

5.2.2 Learnings for Study Participants: Implications for Others' Practice

The learnings of the action learning set participants have been thoroughly discussed in the previous chapter, however a summary of some of the key items has been included below. As such, this section represents recommendations that reflect the six women's experiences and their resulting counsel for other professional women who also seek to access greater power through political engagement. Where possible, I have offered the reader connections between participants' suggestions and the literature on this topic, as well as referencing the quantitative data collected. It is important to note that the qualitative data receives greater focus because it offered more insights into this research project than the quantitative data.

5.2.2.1 Political engagement increases influence, enabling career success and goal accomplishment

An important conclusion of study participants, which tied directly to the objectives of this study and reflects the theoretical framework proposed at the end of my literature review, is that political engagement has the ability to increase women's levels of influence and access to power, enabling them to accomplish individual and organizational goals. This was cited as a result by two of the learning set participants, one of whom referred to an improved reputation and credibility for herself and her team, while the other highlighted increased visibility and involvement at senior levels, positioning her to

advance in her career. This outcome aligns with the literature on this topic that extends that organizational politics, and the informal power with which politics is associated, is necessary for goal accomplishment (Mintzberg, 1983; Forret and Dougherty, 2001; Drory and Vigoda-Gadot, 2010; Doldor *et al.*, 2013; Doldor, 2017).

5.2.2.2 Redefining relationships allows greater ability to influence others and accomplish goals

A key theme that emerged from this study was women's perspectives about relationships as being reciprocal and built on genuine interest in another person, supporting the assertion of Kacmar *et al.* (2011) that women tend to pursue communal goals resulting in close relationships with others. During this research project, this was demonstrated as a need to establish a strong relationship first, before calling on that individual for help or favours. Study participants extended that this view differs from that of men, who do not seem to have the same need for reciprocity or for a deep relationship to exist before leveraging those around them in the accomplishment of tasks, supporting several authors' assertions that men's relationships tend to be instrumental in nature (Davey, 2008; Doldor, 2013; Watkins and Smith, 2014). While this former view persisted through the study, some members of the learning set were able to overcome their discomfort with the idea of appealing to individuals simply because of their positions or ability to support an initiative, reducing their reliance on pre-existing relationships. This behaviour was reinforced when the women received positive responses from those around them, which also enabled them to more effectively champion the initiatives for which they were responsible.

5.2.2.3 Women tend to have low confidence and engage in negative self-talk

Another recurring theme revolved around low levels of confidence, which is highlighted in the literature (Martin and Barnard, 2013; Martin and Phillips, 2017) as a concern for most women. This refers to a confidence gap between the genders, with men being overly-confident while women tend to demonstrate a marked lack of confidence. In this study, the lack of confidence was discussed as being linked to negative self-talk, which prevented women from speaking up and causing them to comment less than their male counterparts, which is highlighted in the literature as a barrier for women professionals (Deloitte, 2012). These behaviours were linked to a perceived lack of knowledge and expertise, and were identified as being tied to lower organizational presence and lessened influence. The learning for study participants was that they are as knowledgeable, or in some instances, more knowledgeable, than their male counterparts. Additionally, the women in this study stated that they

found their input was valued more, the more quickly and frequently they contributed their ideas and opinions, which in turn positively affected their visibility and levels of influence. Similar results are discussed by Martin and Phillips (2017), who describe a correlation between increased confidence and action, which in turn produces greater professional success. Martin and Barnard (2013) also state that the impact of low confidence extends to salary inequities, and women's overall career progression. This points to an important learning for professional women who believe themselves undervalued and underutilized in their roles, since an increase in confidence may impact not only their ability to meaningfully contribute, but may also positively affect items such as promotions and wages.

Personal Learning

From the experiences related by the women in this study, I recognized the same lack of confidence in myself that was expressed by the learning set members. Upon reflection, I realized that this lack of confidence affected how I conduct my work, influencing everything from the assertiveness of my communication with clients to price negotiations. When I realized this was the case, I began to actively look for instances where my lack of confidence had negatively impacted client interactions, and then started to consciously work to change the associated behaviours. As a result, I have found that my business has experienced increased revenues because I no longer undervalue my services and expertise. While I have always attempted to price myself according to the marketplace I operate within, I often found that my male counterparts would negotiate better pricing. Given that women in Alberta still earn approximately 18% less than men employed in the same jobs (Government of Alberta, 2017), this was a concerning trend that I did not want to perpetuate, and I began to consciously shift my thinking about the value that I offered my clients. My initial step was to intentionally increase the cost of my services by 15% to 25%, recognizing that I was undercutting my pricing by at least that amount. Upon receiving positive responses from potential clients in the form of secured contracts, I have continued to price myself in this fashion and have gained greater confidence in maintaining these higher prices.

5.2.2.4 Language impacts the message

Learning set participants highlighted a tendency to employ language that downplays their knowledge and diminishes the overall impact of their words. Examples of this include “I think” and “just”, which the women in this study commonly used when communicating with others. Removal or replacement of these words produced positive results for everyone involved in this research project, and led to improved confidence and increased credibility with work colleagues. This indicates another potential

area of focus for professional women who are seeking strategies that will lend greater credence to their input, and are attempting to make their communication more assertive.

Personal Learning

I reflected on my use of language, just as the learning set members had, and took action to try and replace words such as “just” and “I think”, concerned that my continued use of these would diminish my perceived expertise and credibility. The transition to more assertive language was a difficult one, with the greatest fear being the possibility that I might be viewed by others as arrogant. As I slowly began to make the shift, I found that clients deferred to me more frequently as an expert, and interactions with challenging and sometimes combative clients became easier. Many situations that I dealt with were also resolved more easily, changing from instances that required many iterations and back-and-forth negotiation, to instances that settled after one or two conversations. This was an indicator for me that my messages may be received differently because I am a woman and aligned with the literature that extended that organizational discourse often reflects masculine language.

5.2.2.5 Engage in politics in ways that suit your style and strengths

While the previous chapter describes some of the specific actions that the women in this study employed to expand their levels of influence, participants also expressed the importance of embracing those behaviours that fit each woman’s style and strengths. This means not necessarily adopting masculine behaviours, or eschewing feminine characteristics such as emotions. This recommendation is in support of Deloitte’s (2012) assertion that women are typically most effective when they behave naturally versus adopting behaviours that they would not normally engage in, and aligns with one of the underlying principles of women’s only leadership development, which is the objective of enabling women to create their own leader identity (Ely *et al.*, 2011). As a result, this approach to organizational politics may prove far more effective while also allowing women to act politically without feeling that they are acting in conflict with their feminine identities, which is highlighted as a concern by the literature on this topic (Martin and Barnard, 2013).

5.2.2.6 Perception of politics influences political will

The participants in this project expressed negative views of organizational politics and of the individuals who engaged in political activity. This perception influenced their desire to act politically, stating their expectation that skill should be sufficient for them to be effective in the workplace, and expressing

concerns that they might be viewed negatively by others for behaving politically. Based on the survey data, a negative perception of organizational politics appeared to be consistent across both genders, linked to the fact that political activity was viewed as being for one's personal gain rather than for the good of the business. This finding supports Quimby's (no date) assertion that the use of politics to manipulate is often deemed to be either amoral or immoral. Further, this result also supports the research conducted by Kaya *et al.* (2016) on organizational justice, which states that abandoning organizational policies and rules leaves individuals with the belief that the organization and its members are unfair. Learning set discussions enabled a shift in the study participants' understanding and view of organizational politics, allowing several women in this study to become more active political actors. In this instance, the greatest perception change that occurred was with respect to the intentionality of political actors, and the women who became comfortable behaving politically cited the existence of a strong purpose or objective that motivated them to behave politically. In Quimby's (no date) work this would be described as the application of moral political power.

5.2.3 Learnings for Organizations: Strategies to Enable Women

Generalizable knowledge was not an objective of this study, especially given that a majority of the data collected was gained through qualitative methods, which typically explores topics in depth rather than breadth. As such, qualitative research has been criticized for its lack of generalizability, partly due to the comparatively smaller samples that are studied through qualitative methods (Pandey and Patnaik, 2014). Lincoln and Guba (1985) address this concern with recommendations that emphasize the need to establish, among other things, research credibility, and offer several ways of accomplishing this, including member checks. Member checks entail the researcher sharing transcripts of dialogues to confirm that the data collected matches participants' desired intentions (Pandey and Patnaik, 2014). Ruediger Kaufmann (2012) point to this method as a way of also tempering researcher bias, by helping to prevent the assignment of meaning based solely on the researcher's understanding. A process similar to member checking was completed during this study by having the learning set participants meet to confirm the categories of themes identified, as well as the meaning of individual pieces of data that supported each theme. This suggests the presence of generalizable knowledge that can be applied to similar working groups, organizations, or industries. With these factors in mind, the following section describes some of the findings from this research project that offer insights and ideas for other organizations that are masculine-dominated or operate within predominantly masculine sectors.

5.2.3.1 Enabling women is one component of diversity and inclusion

In this study, women represented a minority group within their masculine-dominated department and industry. As such, many of the experiences they shared revolved around their inability to access higher levels of influence, the perception of being less skilled and knowledgeable when compared to their male colleagues, and feeling that their attitudes and characteristics were less valued than other, more masculine traits. These feelings of inadequacy and being undervalued are echoed by the literature, which states that masculine environments traditionally value masculine traits while devaluing feminine ones (Bierema, 2017; Martin and Phillips, 2017). While the specific examples related were unique to the women in this study, I realized upon reflection, that any group that was in the minority was likely to relate similar stories. This suggests that enabling women should be part of a larger strategy around organizational diversity and inclusion, with the focus being on valuing and understanding all organizational members rather than singling out a particular group, which could result in greater animosity towards that group. This broader approach is echoed by Thomas *et al.* (2004) who also advocate for workplace diversity to be linked to organizations' strategic objectives, thereby making leadership teams accountable for changes in this area. Further, by making diversity and inclusion a priority, an organization can more fully benefit from harnessing the knowledge, background, and perspectives of their diverse workforce, in addition to the reputational and financial benefits that can result (Dass and Parker, 1999; Senichev, 2013).

5.2.3.2 Less gendered organizations provide more supportive environments for women

The department that employs the women in this study is a predominantly masculine-dominated one, operating within an industry that is also masculine-dominated, and which defers to those individuals occupying traditionally masculine roles, such as engineers. As a result, the culture reflects masculine characteristics that make it more challenging for women to be accepted or gain influence, supporting Martin and Phillips' (2017) observations regarding masculine-dominated fields. This culture of masculinity may be further reinforced by the fact that many of the behaviours associated with managers and political actors are linked with men rather than women, and the tendency for dominant groups to resist efforts to remove them from positions of power (Doldor, 2013; Moor *et al.*, 2015; Wessel *et al.*, 2015; Willey, 2017). Crawford and Mills (2011) extend the discussion about the influence of masculine traits in organizational settings, highlighting that accepted norms are further reinforced through the language used by organizational actors, which frequently reflects masculine metaphors and analogies, or includes pronouns that reflect men but not women. Further, embraced organizational beliefs may

reflect traditional views regarding gender roles, which make it difficult for men and women to act in ways that are inconsistent with the expectations of their gender. One example of this is the automatic assignment of child-rearing responsibilities to women versus men (Sharp *et al.*, 2012; Moor *et al.*, 2015).

Recommendations to counter the above challenges were offered by study participants. These recommendations align with ideas presented in the literature and can be summarized as organizations taking steps to de-gender themselves. This can be accomplished through a variety of strategies focused on fixing the system including:

1. Shifting organizational language away from masculine terminology, such as “after action report”, to describe work processes and tasks;
2. Removing gender-specific language from job postings and other organizational documents and doing the same in other organizational communication. This point and the previous one reflects Crawford and Mills’ (2011) work, which extends that organizational norms are created and reinforced through the metaphors and language used. Their research recommends a shift to gender-neutral language as a method of changing organizational culture and practices. While this was not directly identified as a concern during this study, participants did highlight that word choice was an important way of demonstrating confidence when communicating information to others;
3. Encouraging men at all levels, especially in senior leadership roles, to take advantage of benefits such as paternity leave as a way of demonstrating that family responsibilities do not belong solely to women. This type of behaviour may assist in addressing the unconscious gender biases highlighted by Willey (2017) and the institutionalized social norms discussed by others (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Budgeon, 2014);
4. Ensuring that organizational values, role descriptions and competencies reflect feminine characteristics as well as masculine. This may help to reverse the focus and value often placed on masculine traits (Moor *et al.*, 2015; Wessel *et al.*, 2015; Harvard Business Review, 2016), and counter the gender biases that Kolb (2013) states often unconsciously favour men; and
5. Creating opportunities for dialogue where employees can discuss and challenge unconscious biases and perceptions that may lead them to judge behaviours as correct or incorrect depending on the gender of the individual demonstrating them. This recommendation is supported by Willey’s (2017) work in which he describes how unconscious biases, regarding the “in-group” and the attributes of the best leaders, prevent women from gaining influence and

senior roles. He states that once these prejudices or biases are made conscious, individuals are more likely to correct their behaviours. It is important to note that this recommendation acknowledges that Budgeon's (2014) description of modern femininity, in which traditionally masculine characteristics are associated with individuality versus gender, is not yet a reality, and that women who attempt to act in ways that are contrary to their gender are still frequently censured for doing so because of unconscious gender biases.

Personal Learning

I am aware that this project may have been able to go further, had there been organizational support my study. Since I did not receive approval from the department's male leaders to conduct research within their organization, the members of the learning set had to do so on their own time and the actions taken were limited to those things that were within their power. This lack of approval may be interpreted a number of ways, including as an example of the dominant group resisting efforts to change the departmental culture or the role that women currently play within it, and the men's lack of awareness of the impact their behaviours and views have on the women they work with. I can only speculate about the potential further impact of and findings from this study, if we had had the support of the department's senior leaders. At the least, it would have allowed for a more systemic look at this topic, with actions taken addressing both agency and structure. At best, it is possible that interventions enacted at the organizational level would have produced positive changes, thereby making progress in fixing the system. As such, this experience offers more support for the assertion that de-gendering organizations requires the involvement and sanction of senior leaders and will inform my future work with clients by reflecting recommendations that are balanced and include interventions for both individuals' agency and organizational structure. Further, this experience is a stark reminder that even in my role of consultant, I am likely to continue facing similar challenges to those encountered by the learning set participants, with those in masculine cultures evaluating my actions and capability through the lens of gender schemas and organizational norms.

5.2.3.3 Focus on purpose and context versus skills

In this study, the women involved identified the need for a compelling reason for them to engage in political activity. This finding supports others' research on this topic, which states that purpose, especially purpose linked to serving the majority, is necessary for political engagement (Davey, 2008; Drory and Vigoda-Gadot, 2010). The literature reviewed highlights attainment of power as a factor that

motivates individuals to engage in political activity (Shaughnessy *et al.*, 2017). This particular motivation is more frequently associated with men rather than women (Treadway *et al.*, 2005; Martin and Barnard, 2013; Schuh *et al.*, 2013; Moor *et al.*, 2015), and this project supports this assertion, with women participants behaving politically for reasons other than the pursuit of personal power. Instead, study participants expressed a willingness to act politically when in the service of others or in pursuit of organizational objectives, additionally describing behaviours that they would and would not engage in. This latter item included a willingness to leverage relationships and enhance their professional reputations, but an unwillingness to manipulate others or take credit for others' contributions. These points reflect four of the five elements extended by Gotsis and Kortezi (2010) that contribute to a positive perception of organizational politics.

Study participants also expressed their belief that they possessed the necessary skills to behave politically and did not identify any behaviours that they could not participate in due to a lack of ability. Given this finding, organizations may be providing employee development opportunities, such as political acumen training, that is mismatched with the true needs of organizational members. As such, it may benefit organizations to conduct a proper needs assessment of their employees, in addition to identifying the actual skills needed to effectively navigate within their organizational culture, and to provide customized interventions based on those findings. It may be entirely possible that, with activities such as mentorship, or a deeper understanding of the workplace environment and its norms, that more individuals would employ political behaviour as a method of advancing their and others' objectives.

Personal Learning

Nearly all of my professional career has involved leadership, with responsibility for leading others and also developing other leaders. In the case of leadership development, especially when developing and facilitating leadership programs, I had always ascribed to current leadership theories, offering those participating information about the common behaviours that are associated with leadership. While this information was underpinned by the need to be adaptable when working with others, it also largely echoed behaviours and characteristics that are masculine in nature, reflecting most organizations' definitions of leadership. As I immersed myself in the literature surrounding this topic, it became clearer to me that most of the ascribed descriptions of leadership relate to masculine characteristics, which women may be uncomfortable embodying, and which may lead to others' censure because they are

now acting in ways contrary to their gender. This led to me to question both my content and approach to leadership development, highlighting the fact that women leaders cannot simply adopt the behaviours of their male counterparts, but must instead find a different path forward. Realizing this has prompted me to begin revisions to my leadership training materials and has also guided me to adopt a greater balance of masculine and feminine characteristics in my own leadership style.

5.2.3.4 Normalizing organizational politics enables women to engage more effectively

When asked how the organization could better support their political activity, the participants in this study highlighted the need to normalize organizational politics. This was described as encompassing:

4. Educating organizational members about the nature of organizational politics, and positioning it as an acceptable and normal way of accomplishing tasks; and
5. Creating opportunities to network, where the objective is to connect individuals to others who can aid them in the accomplishment of goals.

Women in this study expressed a view that echoes the work of Gotsis, and Kortezi (2010), and Sultan *et al.* (2015), stating that it is difficult to engage in behaviour that is not sanctioned by the organization. They state that by enacting the first recommendation, political activity would be elevated to an acceptable work practice, making it easier to engage politically. In the terms used by Landells and Albrecht (2017), this strategy has the ability to move organizational actors from reactive or reluctant (disengaged from organizational politics and find the associated behaviours distasteful), to strategic or integrated (positive view of politics and perceived as an effective method of accomplishing goals). The second recommendation offers a method of overcoming some of the challenges associated with accessing influential people and overcoming the discomfort of reciprocity as a necessary precursor to asking for favours. In the former instance, the literature identifies women as frequent outliers, who have difficulty accessing the informal networks in which favours and information are traded (Perrewé and Nelson, 2004; Forret and Dougherty, 2001). For the latter, the current research suggests that men are more likely to view relationships as instrumental, while women are more likely to draw only on relationships where reciprocity is possible (Davey, 2008; Doldor, 2013; Watkins and Smith, 2014). Creating an environment that address both of these challenges may motivate women to exercise their political skills more frequently.

5.2.3.5 Remove gender bias from hiring, performance evaluation, and promotion processes

Study participants highlighted concerns that they did not have access to the same type of career opportunities as their male counterparts and expressed the belief that they had to be more qualified than men to be considered as good. The latter issue is identified by Moor *et al.* (2015) as a common occurrence in masculine-dominated environments. The women voiced their frustration that their performance and qualifications were not necessarily the differentiating factor when it came to decisions regarding career opportunities and promotion, suggesting that experienced political actors often succeeded where those relying simply on skills and expertise did not. This parallels the literature on male hegemony and organizational politics in which authors describe women's greater reliance on job performance, versus political engagement as a method of attaining career success, and the requirement for women to exceed job qualifications (Davey, 2008; Moor *et al.*, 2015; Willey, 2017). This finding supports Deloitte's (2018) assertion that implicit bias still exists in selection and promotion, and performance evaluation processes, and may be unintentionally preventing women from succeeding despite their qualifications and skill. To remove unconscious prejudice from these processes, organizations can make changes such as removing identifying information from resumes, performance appraisals, and succession planning documents, allowing leaders the opportunity to review individuals' accomplishments without the influence of gender bias.

Chapter Summary

This first section of this chapter offered a description of the meaning generated by the data collected during this study, while the latter section provided an overview of the implications for practice at three levels: scholar-practitioner and researcher, women professionals employed within masculine-dominated environments, and organizations operating with masculine-dominated environments seeking to enable greater numbers of women. The insights extended here are compared and contrasted with the literature on this topic, highlighting alignments and contradictions with other research, where possible. While generalizable knowledge was not the primary objective of this study, I believe that the ideas and recommendations offered here are transferable to individuals and organizations operating within conditions that are similar to those reflected in this project. Further, this chapter offers strategies for other researchers by highlighting key learnings about the use of action research, and by discussing the implications for practitioners. The next chapter provides a summary of this research project, including the limitations of this study and potential areas for future research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The aim of this study was to understand the relationship between organizational politics and women's influence within workplaces dominated by men. The objective was to identify ways in which women can engage in organizational politics more effectively to expand their informal power, while still acting in ways that are congruent with their feminine identity. Although this reflects a focus on agency, structure was also considered, especially once it became clear that participants' actions and experiences could not be separated from the environment in which they worked. Therefore, the impact on both the study participants and their organizational system was assessed.

The objectives of this project were accomplished through action research, using a combination of data collection methods that included an online survey, action learning sets, and individual interviews. In reflection, the action learning sets and individual interviews proved to be the most valuable in understanding participants' experiences by providing opportunities for experimentation, and learning generated through action and reflection. Following the formal conclusion of this project, I can state that the results produced through individuals' actions generated change, with two of the six women involved citing tangible and continued professional benefits from their participation. The remaining study participants point to a new understanding of organizational politics and greater confidence in their skills to engage in political behaviour, when desired. Additionally, this study has created interest at higher levels of management within the department for future action learning sets for other women who share the same goal of engaging more effectively in organizational politics. From a personal perspective, conducting this research has forced me to challenge several mental models that guided my work as a consultant, while the literature has informed my practice by highlighting several new strategies that can be applied in the business world.

When considering both the academic and practical impact of this study, I believe that my findings have offered additional insights into an element of women's success and advancement that is not frequently considered, especially given the lack of literature that deals with the combined elements of gender and organizational politics. This points to the potential for future research that further explores the relationship between gender and political engagement. Additionally, it offers support for existing literature that extends the requirement for political will as an enabler of political skill. For the researcher, this project highlights some of the challenges associated with the use of action learning as a

data collection method. Specifically, the potential for inaction and groupthink to occur, especially when strong bonds exist between learning set participants.

From a practitioner's perspective, I believe that some of the ideas and recommendations offered here represent generalizable knowledge, however, it is important to note that the experiences related as part of this study may not transfer into other contexts, especially to those environments that would be described as women-oriented, or in which women already possess a dominant role. Although the focus of this study was specifically on the relationship between organizational politics and women's influence, I believe it also provides insights into other areas, most especially the issue of elevating women into senior management roles, particularly since my data and the literature both point to political activity as being necessary for those individuals in leadership positions. My findings also point to the need for shared responsibility for women's success, necessitating action on the part of both the individuals involved and the organizations which employ them. This knowledge should be considered by women wanting to gain greater power, and by organizations seeking to support women in their professional goals.

In addition to the link between political will and skill, this study also tested the theory that organizational politics are both distasteful and effective in goal accomplishment. The data collected offered examples of both of these items, a finding that is congruent with much of the literature reviewed during this study. However, the lack of agreement about the nature of organizational politics within the existing research suggests an area for future study, specifically seeking to confirm that a constructive view of political activity can exist when the five conditions extended by Gotsis and Kortezi (2010) are present.

This research project accomplished its stated objectives, providing insights into the link between organizational politics and women's influence, and creating change for those women participating in this study. Despite that, some of the results were surprising, especially given that learning and knowledge was generated not simply through action, but also through inaction. Further, as facilitator and researcher during the action learning sets, I found that I had far less control over the process than expected, and am grateful that the iterative nature still produced meaningful data for this project.

When reflecting on the academic contribution of this study, I highlight the action-oriented nature of this project, which allowed experimentation with various strategies, real-time knowledge creation within the context of a masculine environment, and contributed to changes at the individual participant level and within the learning set's organizational system. I believe this focus on action and reflection differentiates this project from other research on organizational politics, because the literature reviewed employed data collection methods that focused solely on past experiences to identify patterns and generate theory. While the information gained from the literature review was invaluable in defining organizational politics and associated behaviours, this research project allowed participants the freedom to explore the nuances of political activity, leading them to embrace actions, such as leveraging relationships, that initially seemed unacceptable.

Another key finding of this study was the fact that women may already be skilled political actors, and it is not a lack of ability that prevents them from engaging in organizational politics. Instead, it appears that many women professionals are not motivated by traditional definitions of success, sometimes eschewing positions of power for other, more meaningful roles. For academics, this suggests that further research may be necessary to understand how women relate to corporate objectives and find purpose and meaning in the goals they choose to pursue. From a practitioner perspective, this same challenge extends to organizations who are struggling to increase the gender diversity of their senior leadership teams and boards. That some women are insufficiently motivated, and choosing not to engage politically, suggests a disconnect between the current goal-setting, performance management, and career development processes that many organizations engage in.

A further consideration is the overall lack of confidence that may affect women professionals, which can prevent them from demonstrating their expertise as frequently and consistently as some of their male counterparts. This factor was echoed in the literature and by study participants, with both sources pointing to socialization as the cause. Given that much of an individual's socialization occurs during the formative years, it is a challenging item to address later in adulthood, especially at an organizational level. This points to a need for individual reflection and experimentation, and the support of managers and other influential organizational actors who have within their power the ability to support and encourage the professional women with whom they work. Lastly, if women's lack of political engagement is unrelated to skill, then organizations may need to reconsider some of their initiatives, such as training and mentoring, that are being used to elevate women to higher levels of management,

replacing them with other strategies focused on addressing the reasons behind women's political reticence.

I believe the greatest limitation of this study, in both academic and practitioner terms, was the lack of men and mixed-gender learning sets, which could have helped provide additional insights into this topic. While I am confident that the experiences shared by the women in this study reflect situations that other women will relate to, I am mindful of the fact that collecting data from both a mixed and all-men learning set would offer additional support for much of the existing literature, and greater learning. I believe this to be especially true for a mixed-gender group, which may have allowed greater opportunities to challenge mental models and learning from one another. I cautiously offer this as a potential limitation of this project and suggestion as an area of future research, acknowledging Rigg and Trehan's (2004) assertion that mixed-gender sets can reproduce the same norms and power dynamics present in the real world.

While this study focused on the experiences and actions of six women, I think this goes beyond just being a "fix the women" approach for the following reasons. First, this study did not embrace the perspective that the women involved were in any way deficient, which is one of the underlying beliefs in "fix the women" interventions. Rather, the beliefs underpinning this research were that the women involved were capable and skilled professionals, and that there were tactics that might enable them to be more effective political actors. Additionally, the goal was not to socialize them to masculine norms, but to find strategies that were consistent with women's views of themselves, aligning them with one of the goals of women's only leadership development programs, that of identifying and embracing their unique leadership style.

Second, this study used action learning as a method of data collection and creating change. Action learning has been identified by the literature as one method employed when developing women leaders for its ability to allow experimentation, reflection and feedback on behaviours as participants are developing their leadership style. Third, a fundamental belief in both undertaking and completing this research is that agency and structure are interconnected, with both influencing the other, regardless of where interventions are focused. While I was prevented from intervening at the organizational level due to a lack of management approval, the actions taken both individually and collectively by the learning set participants had an impact on their workplace, as is evidenced by the changes in their systems maps.

For these reasons, I position this study as reflecting many of the principles of “fix the structure” developmental approaches, despite the fact that the point of intervention was with the individual women in the action learning set.

In conclusion, this research project produced the desired outcomes, offering insights into the relationship between organizational politics and women’s influence within masculine-dominated environments. I believe it also went beyond that scope to provide further understanding into the issue of women’s career success, reinforcing some of the existing literature on this topic and offering strategies to address this concern. For the women who participated in this study, individual changes occurred, producing both tangible and intangible benefits. While the research methodology conceived at the onset of this project seemed clear and simple to implement, the reality was vastly different, proving to be far more complex and messy than originally envisioned. Despite that, I am comfortable that it generated invaluable learning and changes for everyone involved, and produced information of interest for both the practitioner and academic communities.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Literature Review Search Terms

The following table summarizes the search terms that were used to locate the literature that informed this research project.

Organizational politics	“organizational politics” AND gender
Gender bias	Political behaviour
Political activity	“organizational politics” AND “social construct”
Corporate politics	Corporate political activity
Political culture	“organizational politics” AND women
“organizational politics” AND men	“organizational politics” AND action research
“organizational politics” AND action learning	Masculine power
Power relations	Gender relations
Male hegemony	Political will
Political skill	“power motivation” AND gender
Women AND “male dominated”	“gender relations” AND power
Power motivation	Gender effects
Gender dynamics	Gendered power
Political competency	Gendered organizations
“Implicit bias” AND male dominance	Unconscious bias
Gender stereotypes	“gender stereotypes” AND “organizational politics”
Action research AND political behaviour	Perceptions of organizational politics
Perceptions of political behaviour	Impact of organizational politics
Informal power	Male-dominated
“organizational politics” AND reciprocity	Workplace politics
“fix the women”	“fix the system”
“fix the structure”	“women’s only leadership development”
“women’s leadership development programs”	WOLD
WLDP	“leadership development” AND “action learning”

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet – Learning Sets & Interviews

Enhancing Women Professionals' Abilities to Engage in Organizational Politics

My name is Dasa Chadwick and I am an external consultant and owner of Leverage Point Learning. You are being invited to participate in a research study on the topic of enhancing professional women's ability to engage in organizational politics, which is part of the requirement for a Doctor of Business Administration degree at the University of Liverpool. This study is unrelated to any of my past, current or future work with your organization. Before you decide whether to participate, it's important to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask for more information or if there's anything that you do not understand. Please also feel free to discuss this with others before making a decision. You do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to.

What is the purpose of this study?

You are being invited to take part in a research study about the impact of organizational politics and how women can engage in these behaviours. The aim of this study is to identify strategies that are comfortable for women professionals to employ and which can lead to outcomes such as greater informal influence, adoption of ideas, and career advancement. This research is being conducted as part of the requirement for a Doctor of Business Administration degree at the University of Liverpool, under the supervision of Dr. Clare Rigg. Further questions about this study or confirmation of my credentials can be obtained by contacting Dr. Rigg at: clare.rigg@liverpool.ac.uk.

What does participation look like?

You are being approached because you are a professional woman, and hold a supervisory role. It is likely that you have encountered and engaged in organizational politics as part of your role in order to influence thinking, gain support for ideas, and create change. It is this experience and your ongoing need to display political acumen in your role that makes you an ideal candidate for this study. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in action learning sets which require you to meet with a group of up to 5 other women on a monthly basis for 6 months.

Action learning is a way of solving real problems in real time, by taking action and reflecting with others on results. The learning it produces enhances the problem-solving process and can produce creative, flexible solutions that are superior to other group-based approaches. During the first learning set, you and others will help to identify the issues surrounding women's participation in organizational politics. Afterwards, you will be asked to identify actions that can be taken to improve the situation, take action, and share your learnings from the actions you've implemented. Each monthly learning set has you repeating this process of reporting on the results and learning produced through the actions taken, and identifying actions you'll take in the next month.

Additionally, you will be interviewed at the conclusion of the learning sets (in month 7) so that any additional learning from the experience can be captured. You will be introduced to a process of action learning and asked to keep a journal of your actions and reflections, which will make it easier for you to share your learnings with fellow learning set members. The goal of the action learning process is not only to generate learning about the topic being studied, but to create change by taking action, resulting in real-time results for those participating. Prior to participating, you will be asked to review and sign an informed consent form, indicating your understanding of the scope of the research, how you will be asked to participate, and how the information you share during the course of this study will be used and disseminated. (Please refer to the Informed Consent form for further details.)

How much time will it take?

The commitment for this study is approximately 1 hour/month for a duration of 7 months (June to December, 2016). This includes 6 monthly learning set meetings, and an individual interview at the conclusion of the learning sets. The initial learning set meeting may require an additional hour in order to become familiar with the action learning process that will be used. Subsequent meetings will focus on a cycle of sharing learnings from actions taken, and generating new understanding and actions for the coming month. The learning set meetings and interview will all take place during off-work hours (e.g. Over lunch or before/after work hours) and at a neutral location convenient to everyone participating.

What are my rights?

Your participation is voluntary. You may withdraw from this research project at any time without any form of explanation. You may also request that any of the data you have contributed up to that point be removed and/or destroyed. Please note that once your data has been aggregated into the overall data collected, it will be impossible to identify and remove your contributions. You have the right to refuse to respond to any question that is posed during this study, without penalty. Please speak with the researcher about any questions you have about the information contained within this overview before agreeing to participate.

What are the risks and benefits?

Your participation in this study will not be shared outside of the learning sets, and those participating will collaboratively develop a set of ground rules that everyone will be asked to adhere to; however, it's possible that others may learn of and disagree with your participation. This could potentially result in retribution from those who disagree with the research, fallout from the unsuccessful application of actions meant to improve the situation such as harm to your reputation, effectiveness, or limitations to career growth.

The action learning sets in particular are meant to create positive change for those taking part in the study and to generate learning that can be extended to other organizations. Anticipated benefits include greater informal power, increased political acumen, and strategies and learning that can enhance others' skills in engaging in organizational politics. At all times, you will have the power to choose which actions to employ as you work towards your objective of becoming more skilled in organizational politics.

How will you address confidentiality?

The data collected will not contain any personal information about you except your position level and gender. As data is being collected, it will be aggregated into the overall data and anonymized, meaning that there will be no way of linking data to the person who supplied it. In this anonymous form, it will be included in my thesis, and become available to other researchers through various databases. The results of this research may also be used for other purposes within my consulting practice such as publication and presentations at conferences. The final results of this study will also be provided to anyone participating in the research, if requested. No other personal data will be collected either directly from those participating.

Are there any costs or compensation involved?

There is no cost to participate and all materials will be supplied to you by the researcher. There is no compensation involved other than the benefits described above.

What if there's a problem?

If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let us know by contacting Dasa Chadwick at 403-457-1186 and we will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to us with then you should contact the Research Governance Officer at ethics@liv.ac.uk. When contacting the Research Governance Officer, please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.”

What happens next?

If you're interested in participating, please complete the Informed Consent form (attached) and return it to me at: dasa@leveragepoint.ca. Upon receipt, you will be contacted to confirm your inclusion in the study and the details of the first learning set. Please note that a maximum of 12 people will be able to participate in this research and will be confirmed on a “first come, first served” basis.



Committee on Research Ethics

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Project: Enhancing Women Professionals' Abilities to Engage in Organizational Politics

Researcher(s): Dasa Chadwick

**Please
initial box**

1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated [DATE] for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
3. I understand and agree that once I submit my data it will become anonymized and I will therefore no longer be able to withdraw my data.
4. The information you have submitted will be published as a report; please indicate whether you would like to receive a copy.
5. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me in any publications
6. I agree to take part in the above study.

Participant Name	Date	Signature
Dasa Chadwick		
Name of Person taking consent	Date	Signature
Dasa Chadwick		
Researcher	Date	Signature

Principal Investigator:

Name
Work Address
3Y9
Work Telephone
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Student Researcher:

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Appendix 4: Learning Set Ground Rules

We agree to:

- Keep the information and comments shared by others in confidence
- Be respectful of others and the comments shared
- Listen to one another with genuine interest
- Clarify ours and others' thinking by asking questions
- Be open and honest in our contributions
- Give others grace by allowing them to make mistakes and to learn from them

Appendix 5: Interview Questions

1. How would you rate your ability to engage in organizational politics now as compared to the start of this study? Why?
2. How would you describe the political climate within your workplace? What effect does this have on your ability to access formal and informal power?
3. What one thing (e.g. learning, change in behaviour, etc.) has made the biggest impact on you and your willingness to act politically?
4. Describe the specific outcomes or consequences of your political behaviour during the course of this study.
5. What behaviours do you see other effective political actors employing?
6. What, if any, particular challenges did you face when acting politically that you believe do not apply to men?
7. What one thing would you ask management to stop/start/change in order to support your engagement in organizational politics?
8. What one misconception did you have about organizational politics that held you back?
9. What piece of advice would you offer other professional women regarding organizational politics?
10. What will you continue to do/do more of?
11. What did you value most about the learning set process you experienced?
12. What would you change about the learning set process you experienced?

Appendix 6: Coding Framework

Qualitative Data Coding Framework

The following themes emerged as factors which impacted women's engagement in organizational politics and, in turn, their access to informal power.

1. Political Skill (ability to behave politically)
 - a. Political behaviours
 - i. Persistence
 - ii. Decisiveness
 - iii. Communicating assertively
 - iv. Building alliances
 - b. Gender bias
 - i. Communication
 - ii. Relationships
 - iii. Value of feminine characteristics
2. Political Will (motivation)
 - a. Negative self-talk
 - b. Lack of Confidence
 - c. Outcomes and intentions/goals
 - i. Values (staying true to self)
 - ii. Beliefs (about organizational politics and those who behave politically)
3. Organizational Politics & Context
 - a. Individual attitudes and perceptions of organizational politics
 - b. Working Environment